

Life Stories and Living Texts

The Political Use of Oral Sources in the Storytelling of Turkey's Past

Carlotta De Sanctis
(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

Abstract This contribution deals with issues related to the use of oral sources in historical research carried out during times marked by high political tensions and it focuses on the case of contemporary Turkey. Storytelling implies selection and assembly, through which interviewees shape an image of themselves but also of their relationship with others and with the world. The purpose is to analyse the narrative potential of oral sources by examining a sample of biographical testimonies of left-wing intellectuals who actively contributed to the constitution of the 'civil society' during the 1980s. The selected interviews show how contemporary political events deeply affect the relationship with the past.

Summary 1. Introduction. – 2 The Roots of Oral History in Turkey. – 3 State(s) of Emergency and Life Stories. – 4 Fragments of the 1980s. – 5. Sociocultural Polarisation and Symbolic Struggles. – 6 Conclusions.

Keywords Oral History. Contemporary Turkey. Interviews. State of Emergency.

1 Introduction

Oral history refers to the use of oral sources in historiographical research.¹ It is a field of study and a research methodology that is primarily based on interviews with the purpose to gather memories and statements of actors engaged in given historical processes. Oral history is therefore built on relational sources emerging from a dialogic context in which the researcher and the interviewee give life to a performance. This relationship comes into being at the moment of the encounter and it is structured in three different levels: the level of the historical event, the present level of the tale of the past, and the level of the relationship between them, the latter being a revision of the event through memory (Portelli 2010, 4-5). This

1 Gianni Bosio adopted this definition in *L'intellettuale rovesciato* (1998), quoted by Portelli (2007, 6).

articulated relationship connects the historicity of events and memory to both the public and private dimensions of social space. The outcome of this triangulation is a text that is composite because the author is called to translate the worldview of the source producer, the socio-cultural context of the text production, the circumstances of its production, and the purposes it was supposed to fulfil.

In historical and historiographical research, oral sources can be therefore useful in two ways: first, in reconstructing certain aspects of the past that would be difficult to obtain through other types of sources and, second, in examining the dimension of subjectivity and the forms of memory. Drawing attention to the latter, this article focuses on the historical event elaboration process and on the interpretation that is given when an event needs to be told. More specifically, the purpose of this contribution is to reflect on some peculiar aspects of biographical testimonies gathered in times marked by high political tension. Given that contemporary Turkey provides a particularly emblematic case, this article tackles issues related to the collection of testimonies of Turkish left-wing intellectuals that were active in the 1980s, when the debate of 'civil society' and new social paradigms started to emerge.² More precisely, the interviews were conducted with selected representatives of the local intellectual elite since they held leadership positions and played a crucial role in the process of elaboration of new practices and theories of social struggle.

In 1980, the military coup marked the beginning of a process that – in Turkey like in many other countries at the time – led to the implementation of a liberal economy, the collapse of radical left ideologies, and the emergence of new social movements for the advocacy of fundamental rights. Accordingly, many scholars defined the 1980 coup as a turning point in contemporary Turkish social thought (Yerasimos et al. 2000). From that moment on, the cultural sphere has been invaded by social action in the form of identity and civil struggles, given that traditional structures of political opposition such as trade unions, organizations and parties were

2 The development of the Turkish 'civil society' in the 1980s and, more particularly, the definition of the relationship between state and civil society have been widely debated. Within the debate, two are the main positions and they can be summarized by the anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin's critique of the arguments advanced by the sociologist Nilüfer Göle. In an influential article, Göle had written: "the autonomization of civil societal elements from the grip of the centre is a sign of the decline of state power, and constitutes a driving force further fuelling the emergence of an autonomous political sphere outside the realm of the state" (1994, 213). Criticizing Göle's conceptualization of the public sphere for being too ideal, Navaro-Yashin argued its ineffectiveness in showing the omnipresence of the state and its power in the various sectors of the public sphere. Accordingly, Navaro-Yashin wrote: "perhaps there is no autonomization to be observed, but rather what may be called a changing enmeshed relationship due to the various ways in which state – civil society relations are mobilized" (2002, 132). For a more detailed discussion of the debate, see Kuzmanovic 2012.

repressed. According to Nicolas Monceau (2005, 126), this kind of political reformulation did not end up in a decline but rather in a change of the collective political commitment that, from that moment on, involved the dual register of 'civil society' and moral militancy due to the effects of the repression.

During the fieldwork research (September 2016-October 2017), the objectives pursued by the social struggles of the early 1980s and the relative political proposals emerged with them have been harshly hit by the repressive measures that the Turkish government in force has undertaken during the state of emergency it declared in the immediate aftermath of the failure of a military coup attempted in July 2016 with the purpose to overthrow it. Lifted only after the victory of the already ruling party at the 2018 general elections, the state of emergency was repeatedly renewed allowing the repression to expand its targets. Initially, it aimed to suppress the subversive organisations that attempted the coup but it soon started targeting freedom of expression, democratic activism and all the allegedly anti-government forces. The interviews at the core of this article have been therefore conducted in a period when the urgency to struggle to reclaim human rights marked the political agenda of any group engaged with their defence in a way that recalled the socio-political struggles of the 1980s. Actually, the interviews had been initially designed to gather evidence of personal involvement in the political struggles of the past and what they revealed is that contemporary events influence the storytelling of the past. This process occurs in any kind of storytelling - whether politically connoted or not - but this contribution focuses on case that is particularly interesting due to the high-degree of conditioning that present events have on the storytelling of past events.

In the analysis of Michel Foucault's works, David Carlson argues "Self-definition is not a process whereby autonomous individuals freely choose and articulate an identity in a vacuum. Instead, it is process where institutionally specific discourses speak through us, transforming us into particular kinds of individuals" (2009, 181). Therefore, a biographical text must be examined not only for the data it provides in order to understand what it says but also to grasp why certain themes - rather than others - have been chosen and how they have been addressed, i.e. to identify some of the discourses underlying the narration (Carlson 2009, 189). Understood as such, this kind of texts provide information about the period when they have been produced as well as about the period they tell about. In particular, what this case study allows to examine is the complex relationship between the conditions of the present and the use of political memory not only in terms of mutual implication but also in terms of narrative agency of the narration and its ties with the multiple vicissitudes of the contemporary. The body of the interview is therefore considered as a type of 'complex text' that derives from a dialogic performance. As such, it allows us to

more directly reveal the relationship between the text itself, the context from which it emerged, and the fragments of historical-social reality that it contains. Within this perspective, the interviews provide an example of ethnographic study, which contributes to reflect on the relationship between the storytelling and the worldview of the narrator.

2 The Roots of Oral History in Turkey

Known as *sözlü tarih* in Turkish, oral history made its appearance in the local academic context in the early 1990s (see Neyzi 2010). Research centers and independent foundations that started applying the novel methods of socio-historical investigation have been pioneering in this field. Next to the enthusiasm sparked in the public sphere, the methodological debate was extended also within universities since the second half of the 1990s, when the first courses of oral history were established by the History Department of the Boğaziçi University of Istanbul under the direction of Arzu Öztürkmen, who has never stopped playing a crucial role in the advancement of oral history research through her studies on the relationship between folklore and nationalism. For instance, she organised the XI Conference of the International Oral History Association (IOHA), which took place in June 2000 in Istanbul (Neyzi 2010, 444). At the end of the 1990s, the Sabanci University of Istanbul established the first oral history courses under the coordination of Leyla Neyzi, who was responsible also for the coordination of the oral history projects initiated by the *Tarih Vakfı* (History Foundation) thus paving the way to the application of theories emerged in the academic context to the reality of independent projects.

In addition to the activities carried out by Arzu Öztürkmen and Leyla Neyzi, the work done by other two women like Esra Özyürek (2006) e Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) deserves to be mentioned since their efforts to introduce the discipline in the universities were accompanied by significant contributions in the field of memory studies based on the examination of the country's relationship with its past through an anthropological lens. From the brief overview provided so far, it therefore emerges clearly that the academic research in the field of oral history and memory studies related to the Turkish context have been carried out mainly by women. Coming from different academic backgrounds (sociology, anthropology, literature and gender studies), they all contributed to a considerable expansion of the covered topics through the analysis of personal testimonies (Neyzi 2010, 444). The academic career of these scholars was characterized by long periods of research abroad (especially in the study centers of American and European universities) and this particularity must be remarked since it stimulated the internationalization of the academic debate on memory

in Turkey and allowed the construction of bridges for the dissemination of new theories for historical research.

Throughout the Two-thousands, development and refinement of the methodology led to the expansion of the areas of study, which focused on a variety of topics including women rights, ethnic and religious minorities (especially Alevis and Kurds), migration, and urban poverty. Since the early 1990s, this type of studies had however to deal with a problem, namely the strong emphasis on what is proposed as Turkish 'official' history. Strong nationalist rhetoric has always expressed the symbolic construction of national unity thus preventing the legitimation of antagonistic struggles and of any kind of events labelled as suspicious insofar as questioning the centrality of the nation-state. Several are the researches confirming and denouncing how Turkish national history has excluded many events from institutionalization by creating a discrepancy (Neyzi 1999; Öztürkmen 2001; Özyürek 2006). On one side, there is the national official history and, on the other side, there are personal as well as communitarian experiences and memories. Meltem Ahıska describes this paradox in the following way.

[The official truth] suffers from agoraphobia, because it cannot locate itself in relation to a specific time and place; it is everywhere, yet nowhere. It has to be secured against the challenge of the practical and the specific to have a closure. It denies the life of a singular person, while positing a general subject of total institutions - such as the military, the psychiatric hospital, or the prison. The narratives of memory, in contrast - such as in the prison - or can only survive in the intimacy of private places. These metaphorical descriptions can give us a sense of how different registers of truth operate in Turkey. (2006, 24-5)

Nevertheless, many organizations or independent studies have tried over time to save these memories from oblivion. Starting from the 1990s and following the rediscovery of the identity policies started in the previous decade, several were the associations that carried out research in oral history and that, in certain cases, collected precious archival material. Among them, the above-mentioned *Tarih Vakfı* (History Foundation) has played a fundamental role in the translation of texts, dissemination of academic research and archiving of oral sources (cf. Monceau 2007 and De Sanctis 2017). With regard to the research in the specific field of gender studies, *Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı* (Women's Library and Information Centre Foundation) is the institution that has published and disseminated studies on the memory and women's testimonies.

In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in oral history both within universities and within independent foundations. Yet, it must be pointed out that the methodology's shortcomings are still many. At the methodological level, the theoretical preparation and survey accuracy of

many non-academic studies are still problematic, but problematic is also the institutionalization of memories that detach themselves from the official history repertoire and are not given the possibility of carving out an autonomous space (Neyzi 2010, 447). In order to understand how the 'official' history of Turkey has never stopped to profoundly affect the local collective memory, it must be discussed more in detail how specific events of crucial historical significance affected the life of those who lived them and are called to tell them precisely in a period when present circumstances recall them to memory due to the commonalities between different historical contexts.

3 State(s) of Emergency and Life Stories

Until the 1980s, Turkey's history was characterized by three coup d'états (1960, 1971 and 1980). The three respective decades corresponded to specific phases of political militancy. Albeit a certain degree of diversity, the 1960s and the 1970s were marked by a crescendo of ideological radicalization, while the third military intervention cracked down on the far-left organizations that had been protagonists of the political scene in the previous decades. With the coup of 12 September 1980, the military decreed the state of emergency throughout the country declaring that the objective was to protect democracy and defend national unity, but the harsh repression that followed aimed to stop the very violent clashes among far-left and far-right organisations by attempting to eliminate oppositional forces from the political scene, especially left-wings ones. More importantly, the repression was in fact instrumental to the implementation of a wider project of radical redefinition of the social, political and economic life of the country (Nocera 2011, 69).

Nonetheless, censorship, prohibitions and limitations against the associative realm did not succeed in crushing social criticism, which gradually reconstituted itself within a renewed civil context, namely one structured on consensus and oriented towards the respect for human rights. Armed struggle was abandoned leaving space for less violent forms of demonstration and the organisation of lawful associations; the focus of social conflicts shifted from the economic system to the socio-cultural sphere stimulating the organization of projects, initiatives and associations based on principles such as equality, pluralism and democratization (Groc 1998; Göle 1994; Keyman, İçduygu 2003). The expansion of a lively cultural debate was useful to introduce new social paradigms in certain circles of Turkish society. This was in fact the period marked by the emergence of the femi-

nist debate³ and, more generally, by the emergence of the commitment to the protection of human rights.⁴

What must be highlighted is the peculiarity emerging from the examination of the activities and associations came into being the 1980s: the presence of an elite group of leftist intellectuals who contributed to the development of a strong criticism against the established order and suggested alternative practices that became central to the development of critical thinking in the following years. The process of reconversion of activism practices towards associative practices was in fact marked by the discussion of new topics of social interest through debates, publications and translations. The testimonies of intellectuals who joined the process provide a case study that is particularly interesting since the 20 interviews on which this contribution is based were conducted in Istanbul and Ankara under the state of emergency. The mixed sample of interviews includes 8 women and 12 men born between 1943 and 1955.

The results of the research confirm that the interviewed group of women and men who contributed to the emergence of criticism against the regime's anti-democratic drift and to the introduction of feminism and the universality of human rights into the debate, belong to what Karl Mannheim (2000) defines the same "generational unit". Whether directly involved or not, the interviewees made the experience of radical political struggle during the years of their university studies. In the years leading up to the coup of 12 September, most of them had already started their academic career. Their involvement in civil activism and their participation in protest demonstrations must be then interpreted in the light of this

3 In the 1980s, Turkish feminism developed into what can be actually called a movement organized by women for women. Throughout the decade, the rethinking of the role of women in society and political activism inspired the organization of numerous initiatives. In particular, the various publications played an important role insofar as they sealed the theoretical apparatus of Turkish feminism and its various tendencies. In 1982, feminists decided to present their theories to the public by publishing a daily page in *Somut*, a weekly magazine published by YAZKO. Once this experience ended, others arose. For instance, the publishing house *Kadın Çevresi* 'Women's Circle' dealt with the translation of the major texts of foreign feminist literature. In the following years, the various tendencies of Turkish feminism were brought together through the publication of magazines such as the radical *Feminist* (1987) and the socialist *Kaktüs* (1988). For the history of the Turkish feminist movement, see Tekeli (1995, 2005) and Arat (1994).

4 The Human Rights Association (*İnsan Hakları Derneği*, İHD) was founded in 1986 and it paved the way for a democratic approach to the issue: to speak in the name of all people subjected to abuse without political distinctions. The ninety-eight founders were relatives of political prisoners, intellectuals, academics, and journalists who were influential in the public sphere both in Turkey and internationally. The Solidarity Association for the Families and Relatives of the Arrested (*Tutuklu ve Hükümlü Aileleri Yardımlaşma Derneği*, TAYAD) was also founded in the same years but its approach to human rights was more particularistic compared with the one of İHD insofar as the focus was on specific political causes (Plagemann 2000, Kamiloglu 2018).

crucial biographical data, for the repressive measures targeting university institutions in the 1980s deeply influenced their experiences.

In 1981, the YÖK (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu*, Council of Higher Education) was founded as part of the social control plan put in place after the coup of September 12. As such, the aim of the institution was to abolish the administrative and financial autonomy of the universities, which were accused of being the primary place of organisation of the political activism in the previous years. More than two thousand officials and hundreds of university professors who were suspected of being political sympathizers of the radical left and had expressly criticized both the coup and the following policies were expelled with the Law no. 1402 issued in 1983. The repression affecting the university body was precisely what functioned as catalyst in the reconfiguration of the cultural and intellectual field in Turkey (Monceau 2005, 2007). In fact, many of those who had been forced to leave the universities reorganised themselves and gave life to a multitude of activities that radically marked the introduction and diffusion of alternative models of cultural politics.

Over the years, the demands put forward since the early 1980s have become the core of the critique of the status quo and they still continue to have a crucial significance to this day, especially in the denouncing of the authoritarianism that marked the repressive wave following the attempted coup d'état in July 2016. Hence, memories are influenced by a double level of involvement due to the high degree of politicisation of both the past (time of the memory) and the contemporary (time of the interview). The interviews were in fact conducted while the state of emergency declared in 2016 was still being in force, so narrators were called to give account of their lives and personal involvement in past political activities while part of them was being directly or indirectly targeted by the recent repressive measures enforced by the security organs. Albeit the diversity of the repressive policies and their primary targets, both the periods following the 1980 and the 2016 coups have been marked by the harshness of the crackdown on freedom of expression and anti-government thought. Back then just like nowadays, the consequences have an impact on universities, petitions and press.⁵

5 The most common parallelisms emerging from the sample of the interviews examined here concern the attack on schools and universities. In the period of the military junta, the reformulation of the educational system envisaged the implementation of the law n. 1.402 which forbade 1,255 teachers to continue their activity. Today, two years after the declaration of the state of emergency, the number of academics who have been removed from the universities amounts to 5,822 (the number includes also those who lost their jobs as a result of the closure of the entire university). Another practice that unites the past and present periods is the signing of solidarity petitions and denouncing statements. In May 1984, the signatories of the petition *Türkiye'de Demokratik Düzene İlişkin Gözlem ve İstemler* (Observations and Requests on the Democratic Order in Turkey) were 1,256 intellectuals

Generally, interviewees do not show a significant reticence when invited to grant the interview and the same goes when they openly (re)assert their own political standpoint – whether it be past or present. Yet, they react in different ways depending on the type of political commitment carried out in the present. Those who have abandoned the political struggle and the realm of public visibility are generally more inclined to grant more detailed interviews and this is due to two reasons. Questions such as “why are you interested in my story?” and “who advised you to talk with me?” show that it is a matter of self-esteem. In addition to this, the interviews offer them the possibility to tackle certain issues that, by now, some others have relegated to the private sphere. In these cases, the stories reveal in greater depth details about the participation in illegal organizations, the militancy, and the proximity to revolutionary personalities. Instead, those who are still involved in political movements and/or activities show more caution. For them, the risk is greater and it can be therefore argued that degree of popularity, participation in events and media exposure weaken the enthusiasm to issue statements. This second type of interviews is usually less romantic and more focused on the details about the participation in the movements of the 1980s rather than about the previous years.

In addition to these observations, further remarks need to be made with regard to the construction of a trust relationship between researcher and interviewee, namely a process that develops itself during the interview. In the specific case of this research, the intersectional peculiarities of my condition as researcher were important elements that conditioned its establishment. They include: the significant generational gap between the interviewees and me, the condition of being a foreigner, and the condition of being a woman who is therefore potentially sensitive to gender issues. As for the latter, it must be pointed out that it favourably influenced the relationship. In brief, the dialogic performance of the interview was influenced by the peculiarities of my subjective condition in accordance to what is known as reflexivity in social research.

With regard to the position assumed by the interviewees, the attitude to be highlighted is their self-confidence. Unlike many other studies in oral history, the group was composed by intellectuals who are fully aware of their own narrative strategies and, furthermore, who are used to mak-

who denounced the practical and legal limitations to cultural and artistic activities in the country and, accordingly, requested greater freedom of expression. In January 2016, 1, 128 academics signed the petition *Bu Suça Ortak Olmayacağız* (We will not be part of this crime), which criticised the government’s security operations in south-eastern Turkey, where cities are predominantly inhabited by the Kurdish population. When Erdoğan’s threats increased, the number of the signatories also increased (2,212 academics signed the petition). In the 1980s, 59 people were prosecuted. At the present time, more than two years after signing the petition, at least 265 academics from public and private universities in Istanbul are being prosecuted for ‘spreading terrorist propaganda’.

ing statements. Being used to mastering their own speeches, they are in fact aware of the possible techniques to safeguard their privacy both against the possible risks of political nature and against previous alleged accusations concerning their social status. In the case of tense political situations, the establishment of trust is however affected by the greater difficulties marking the context. Hence, even when the discourse seems to flow freely, it is necessary to keep in mind the constant activation of filters when discussing issues collectively recognized as 'thorny'. For the most part, these issues are easily identifiable because the most common indictments and censorship techniques generate a widely shared mapping of what is generally better to avoid declaring both in public statements and in private statements made outside the domestic sphere. Starting from the analysis of selected interviews, it is therefore possible to reflect on the deep connections between the life story and the process of construction of reality. Given this, the storytelling of the 1980s takes on a particular relevance since some of the social and political struggles that continue to play a central role in the construction of a strong oppositional front against antidemocratic tendencies to this day emerged at that time.

4 Fragments of the 1980s

The model of social antagonism emerged after the 1980 coup was obviously designed and developed in response to the deep complexity of the relative historical and social context. The redefinition of social demands had to deal not only with the violence of the repression of the 1980s but also with the high politicization inherited from the ideological radicalization of the previous years. The coup d'état was in fact a watershed in the contemporary history of the country but it did not succeed in erasing the ideological debate within the Turkish left. The past of the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s was too close and their legacy was quite strong. Hence, demands related to pluralism, gender issues and environmentalism could not be swept away so easily despite the intensification of repression. The comparison between the past and the contemporary situation included in the excerpt below shows very clearly how the interviewee (a woman who was engaged in the theoretical debate on Marxism in the 1980s) highlights the emergence of ideological scepticism in concomitance with the emergence of the debate on 'civil society'.

At that time [in the 1980s], I thought that fighting against the state from the stance of civil society would hide the discussion of class related issues insofar as civil society is dominated by capital. But I have to admit that in the current situation I became a supporter of civil society. At this point - the point at which we arrived - fighting against the state through

the concepts of 'civil society' is inevitable. Before the Eighties, the trade union movement was very strong and the left was closely connected to the labour movement. After the coup, this connection failed because the left and all the trade union movements were suppressed. This was one of the purposes of the coup and one of his greatest achievements. Thus, part of the left gathered around the human rights movement and the part that instead continued to defend the class struggle could no longer reconstitute relations with the working class. That's why I say that we need to reformulate the critique of civil society and human rights movements. We are in a situation in which the class struggle is rather impossible; human rights are too often violated. This is why I think that civil society is now something extremely interesting. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 5 October 2017)

The fragment highlights two of the trends that characterized the left after the coup of 12 September: on one hand, the continuation of the political struggle in the same ideological terms that characterized the previous decades and, on the other hand, the reconstitution of the struggle focused on the defence of human rights and their universality. As it clearly emerges from the above statement, the accusations made against 'civil society' theories by those who continued to maintain a more ideological approach to political antagonism focused instead on the alleged abandonment of class struggle. According to this interpretation, the concept of civil society – defined in Gramscian terms as a domain of the bourgeoisie – concealed the oppression and exploitation intrinsic to its own formulation. In this sense, then, the notion of 'civil society' was considered to be the symbol of liberalization and therefore of the rejection of the revolutionary struggle (Bora 2016, 726). Bringing the discussion back to the contemporary, the interviewee describes her personal change of perspective with regard to the paradigms of the political struggle. The fragment of her story moves in fact from a critique of the assumptions of 'civil society' to the awareness of its importance in denouncing contemporary antidemocratic tendencies. Proximity to human rights issues is told in such a way as to be included within the more general political debate that was set up after the coup also in the fragment below, where the movement for the defence of human rights of the 1980s is presented in terms of necessity as an urgent response to the violence perpetrated by the repression.

In the Eighties, also illegal organizations continued to exist but we wanted to carry on the struggle for human rights and for freedom of expression and thought. Economic and social rights related struggles could come only after that. When first-degree rights are violated, these cannot remain waiting for those of second- and third-degree. They have priority. At that time, the other political demands were not so urgent.

We were fighting for the improvement of prison conditions. There were hunger strikes, they did not feed the inmates, they oppressed them, they tortured them. It happened that some families came to know that their son had died in prison after months spent without getting an answer. There were other groups working and fighting for matters that were more 'political' in the classical sense, from an economic point of view. No, for us priorities were different. First of all there were the right to life and the right to an impartial process. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 5 September 2017)

In this text, the interviewee (also a woman) refers in particular to İHD (Human Rights Association), which was founded in 1986 by intellectuals, academicians and journalists together with some political detainees' relatives. The cooperation with the latter aimed to reach a greater impact in the public opinion in Turkey as well as internationally. In this fragment, human rights activism is proposed as rethinking of the practices of left-wing politics, which was re-establishing itself within a new social landscape that, in turn, was characterized by increased repression. Several of the interviewed intellectuals who contributed to the configuration of a new type of civil activism since the second half of the 1980s joined İHD. Hence, the observations made so far confirm that, in general, stories about the new realm of associations let emerge the difficulties encountered in developing a debate on the issue of the universality of rights within a context highly influenced by ideology and repression (cf. Kamiloglu 2018, Plagemann 2000).

The 1980s was also the period when the second wave (*ikinci dalga*) of feminism emerged in Turkey,⁶ i.e. when the small circuits of discussion born in the immediate aftermath of the coup gradually became an actual movement organised by women for women. In the scholarly literature on the 1980s, it is in fact argued that women suffered the repression wave following 1980 coup to a relatively lesser extent (e.g. less arrests compared with men). The reason lies in the fact that they only rarely held leadership positions in the revolutionary organisations of the 1960s and 1970s,⁷ so they became free to reappropriate a space for political expression that until then had predominantly remained a prerogative of men thus having the chance to reorganise it devoid of the hierarchy typical of the strongly centralised structures of the traditional radical left (Tekeli 2005, 270). This

6 The first wave, instead, refers to the phase of women struggles in the transit period from the late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, which was founded in 1923.

7 It must be however specified that the procedural documents relating to the sentences against far-left organizations include many women who had been involved in the revolutionary struggle. The figures of the major trials against the most important left organizations refer to a percentage of around 10%. Data extrapolated from the work by Emel Akal, *Kızıl Feministler: Bir Sözlü Tarih Çalışması* (quoted in Nocera 2013, 51).

shift in the political context is well illustrated by one of the first feminist activists in the following fragment.

[During the second half of the Eighties] I started working for a newspaper and I met a guy who fell in love with me, but I had a husband in prison. I was writing about different things, about literature and philosophy. Until then, I had dealt only with politics. It was a really vibrant period in Turkey. The situation was terrible but many people who were not involved with the political movements were reading and thinking; they were discovering Deleuze, Foucault. And new things were opening, new conversations were coming out. We had time to think, before there wasn't. We believed that the revolution would have happened the next day. [...] It is in this period that the feminist movement began to take its first steps. It was a very nice moment of my life, a rebirth. It was horizontal. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 23 June 2017)

This text also shows that the understanding of the emergence of the feminist movement must take into account the political experiences of the years preceding the coup, which women criticised for a lack of attention to gender issues.

More generally, both minorities issues and issues related to the influence of the Kemalist ideology⁸ of the early Republic on the majority of the groups of the radical left of the 1960s and 1970s were at the core of the debate on the definition of new social paradigms. From the 1980s onwards, the strong state-centric model started in fact to show the first signs of weakening. The new social movements began to question the culture of obedient submission to the Kemalist state by rejecting its strong nationalism and by envisaging an alternative model somehow inspired also by the models of the international movements of the time, the European Union, and the system of Western democracies. What the very conformation of feminist, identity-related and pro-human rights politics strongly challenged was precisely the patriarchal and patriotic approach of Kemalism because of its incompatibility with the model of a pluralist and egalitarian society. In this regard, the interviewees distance themselves from Kemalism even more firmly than in the case of other political antagonisms, stressing that overcoming it was – and continues to be – an essential condition for any other political alternative to be possible. This issue is question is well exemplified in the following fragment:

⁸ Kemalism is the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic and refers to the political, economic and social principles advocated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It can be synthesized in the six key concepts (“six arrows”) that have been elaborated in 1931 at the congress of the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP): nationalism, republicanism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolutionism (Bozarslan 2006, 39).

I was in favour of the political representation of the Islamists because, although I grew up in a certain type of left, I have never been a Kemalist. I was not a liberal, I was leftist but there is a strong Kemalist component inside the left. Marxism was very direct at that time, but then you have to deal with the ethnic question, the Islamists, the Kurds and the Alevis. And you must face and accept the reality: there is a group of people struggling against silencing and non-acceptance. That was probably the reason why I got more and more involved with minorities issues and, if you're involved with these kinds of issues, it's really hard for you to become a Kemalist. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 10 February 2017)

As in previous examples, textual analysis requires to take into account the significance of contemporary events in order for the memory's selection process and the choice of specific topics to be understood. In an interview granted to Osman Akinhay and Foti Benlisoy (2008), Sungur Savran analyses the differences between the ideology of the Kemalist Left before the 1980s and the reactionary nationalist position it assumed especially since the second half of the 1990s onwards. Although the analysis of the two formulas of Kemalism shows a continuity confirmed by the persistence of common elements, this sort of reactionary drift of the last decades must be examined within the wider historical context. Accordingly, it must be recalled that religious issues acquired a renewed significance in the 1980s. Tensions arisen as a consequence of the emergence of new political actors aspiring to take power by exploiting feelings of belonging to the Islamic community caused the reaction of Kemalists, who reinforced their traditional position on the question of secularism. In addition to this, Kemalists reinforced also their nationalistic attitude in the approach to ethnic issues and this happened especially following the outbreak of the Kurdish question (Akinhay, Benlisoy 2008, 19).⁹ In short, the strengthening of the traditional principles of Kemalism constituted an additional reason why part of the Left questioned not only the Kemalist legacy on the revolutionary organisations of the 1960s and 1970s but also the legacy of those very organisations on the choice of the path that part of Left of the 1980s wanted to embark on in order to change the approach to the controversial issues discussed so far (patriarchy, minorities, and hierarchy of the organisational structures).

9 The Kurdish movement requires separate analysis although it underwent a process of reformulation during the historical period under examination. Unlike the identity politics practices of mobilisations discussed in this article, the PKK emerged in fact as one of the formulas of the armed revolutionary organizations. The first attempts to reintegrate the Kurdish identity in the cultural sphere began in the early 1990s and, from the Two-thousands onwards, they result in the acquisition of a specific space in the field of cinema, theatre and publishing.

5 Sociocultural Polarisation and Symbolic Struggles

The interviewed representatives of the intellectual generation of the 1980s strove to find an alternative political model that would guarantee the respect of human rights without neglecting the implications of the sociocultural polarisation marking the Turkish society especially due to the conflict among the various ethnic and religious communities composing it. In order for this task to be accomplished, human rights had to be defined and reclaimed as universal, i.e. regardless of the collective identity of individuals as members of any cultural, social and political group. In this regard, the testimony of one of the most engaged human rights activists in Turkey is particularly useful to illustrate both the debate and its context.

One day a member of the terrorist organization Hezbollah who wrote a letter because he wanted us to help him. He had been tortured and asked for help from us. At that time this organization had killed our friends. To discuss this issue, we held a meeting with fifty-two members of the association and I told them: "My position on the issue is clear but I wait for the decision of each of you". Out of fifty-two people only two refused the proposal for help, the other fifty said we had to help him because we were a human rights organization and we did not have to care about the political thought. The two who refused said: "these people killed our mothers, our fathers, and our brothers. İHD¹⁰ has nothing to do with the torture of torturers". I thanked everyone for sharing their ideas and I told these two people that I did not agree, that we should not have been interested in people's past, and that we should have looked at the current situation. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 15 May 2017)

The perspective of an insider on the debate on the applicability of universal principles is crucial insofar as the text testifies to the high political tension marking the context in which the universality of the reclaimed rights was supposed to be applied. Additionally, the construction of a democratic model for the 'civil society' associations has had to face issues emerged due to the political changes occurred from the end of the onwards.

Social polarisation has in fact grown exponentially following the increasing success of new political actors whose social consensus has been largely built upon the feeling of religious belonging of their supporters: the Wel-

10 The human rights association İHD (İnsan Hakları Derneği) was founded in 1986 and it paved the way for a democratic approach to the issue: to speak in the name of all people subject of abuse without political distinctions. The ninety-eight founders were relatives of political prisoners, intellectuals, academics, and journalists who were influential in the public sphere both in Turkey and internationally.

fare Party (RP, Refah Partisi) first and then the Justice and Development Party (AKP - Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) under the respective leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Hence, the pervasiveness of Islam in the political arena and in the public sphere has become one of the central issues of the symbolic struggles characterising the historical period going from the aftermath of the 1980s up to now. Over time, the different models of interpretation of reality have led to the escalation of the clash of interests between those who have managed to dominate the political sphere and those who have always remained in an antagonistic position. This situation can be interpreted through the theoretical scheme that Pierre Bourdieu proposed to define the social world.

The social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition, in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself [...] but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favourable to his or her social being [...] and to the accumulation of a symbolic capital of recognition. These struggles take place both in the order of everyday existence and within the fields of cultural production, which, even if they are not oriented towards this sole end, like the political field, contribute to the production and imposition of principles of construction and evaluation of social reality. (2000, 187)

The growing electoral success of the AKP intensified conflict at the symbolic level and, furthermore, it required a deep rethinking of consensus related issues since the demands of the proponents and/or advocates of the 'civil society' paradigm stood in sharp opposition to the government's purposes, which instead received the support of a large part of the Turkish population.¹¹ Beside the disappointment, the left-wing intellectual elite has had to face the facts: the model they proposed has never succeeded in obtaining sufficient consensus in order for it to prevail. The following fragment draws attention to the significance of symbolic struggles by highlighting also this specific aspect of the debate.

[In the Eighties] there was a lot of hope. We were trying to create a better future and we were sure it would have come. Totally different than now. We were sure: it would have been successful. Democracy, associations, leftist groups would have won. We never expected such a thing. When the AKP came to power, I would never have imagined that

¹¹ In the general elections, the Justice and Development Party got 34.42% in 2002, 46.58% in 2007, 49.83% in 2011, 40, 87% in 2015, and 42.56% in 2018.

this would happen. I read it as a response to Kemalism, neither more nor less. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 26 March 2017)

The interviewee was not the only one thinking that the consolidation of political Islam had to be interpreted as a reaction to the rigidity of the Kemalist secularism. Many shared the same opinion but their position changed as soon as the ruling parties started implementing policies in deep contrast to the political principles inspiring the 'civil society' organisations, whose development has however continued over the years. More and more associations have been in fact established and their activities have increased.¹² Nonetheless, actors directly involved in their organisation claim a lack of adequate space for democratic discussion not only with regards to the institutional level but also with regard to the political debate internal to anti-government circuits as argued in the text below.

Looking at the present day – if you look at the general situation – democracy is something that intellectuals or left-wing activists and the Kurdish armed movement await. This is really problematic because the left does not pursue a democratic program but a revolutionary one, and the Kurds are still at war with the state. However, we do not await democracy from these two channels and this is a highly problematic factor. There are many limitations and unfortunately there is no democratic culture in the state, in the left, and in the Kurdish movement. Everyone tries to learn how to act in favour of democracy but, for instance, we do not have liberals who talk about democracy, and this is a problem. There is no democratic *agency* in the society [italics added]. (Unpublished interview by the Author, 10 February 2017)

The situation has not improved in recent years. Social polarization has become more intense fuelling the exacerbation of conflict, which expanded from the symbolic level to the everyday level of political practice. As mentioned above, fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and assembly have been in fact increasingly violated with the implementation of a wave of repressive measures that started escalating at the time of the Gezi Park uprising (2013) and reached their peak during the state of emergency following the last attempted coup (from 2016 until 2018).

12 In the 1990s, these movements flourished, increasing consensus and establishing themselves as civil opposition to government policies. Alongside independent initiatives, various activities were established in what is known as 'third sector' and the process of their institutionalization began in the following years. In the two-thousands, the European Union and other international bodies financed part of the Turkish associative and cultural world, which benefited also from the huge investments of large business families – Koç, Sabancı – and banks – especially Yapı Kredi, Akbank, Garanti – (Nocera 2013, 181).

Definitely, this has crucial consequences on oral history studies since the purpose of spoken memories is not so much to reconstruct an event but rather to understand the interviewees' relationship with that event.

6 Conclusions

The specific function of storytelling is to gather the interpretations of a certain event on the basis of the stories told by a group of people who have been involved in the event. In order to investigate how the contemporary influences the storytelling of the past, this work focused the analysis on the life stories of Turkish left-wing intellectuals who have been invited to tell today about the 1980s, i.e. when they joined the debates on the urgency of defining political practices adequate to construct a democratic model of 'civil society' able to face the challenges of the time and to overcome the unwanted legacies of the past. In the case examined in this contribution, the degree of influence of the contemporary circumstances on the memories is extreme for two reasons. First, the past being told is deeply politically connoted not only because it was in the 1980s that the 'civil society' started organising itself as oppositional front starting from animated debates on issues such as human rights and gender but also because the same intellectuals, who were particularly active within those debates, directly faced the consequences of the wave of repression marking that specific historical period. Second, the current political circumstances are marked by a high degree of repression directly affecting many of the interviewees and some of them may also be under investigation for reasons relating to very recent and/or contemporary political events.

Given this, the analysis revealed how human actions are dialectically connected to the social structure in a way that makes the dimensions of human actions and social structure mutually constitutive. The factors to be taken into account when conducting a research in oral history include: performance of the interview, practices to control the speech, more or less conscious memory selection of certain events rather than others, judgment, evaluation, and expectations. In this regard, the examination of the fragments of the 1980s revealed the need to problematize the conditions of a research conducted within a context of intense repression like Turkey in the last few years, especially during the state of emergency lasted from 2016 until 2018. Among the applied communication strategies, the selection of the memories to be told is particularly relevant since self-protection concerns both the interviewees and the researcher. While the first selects memories depending also on the degree of direct involvement in contemporary political activities, the latter selects the contents to discuss applying filters that vary depending on the choice of facing the risks due to the repression underway during the period of research.

At this regard, it must be therefore remarked that the examined texts were selected for their importance in the understanding of the debate on the 'civil society' within part of Left of the 1980s but they revealed a lot about the contemporary. As for the contents emerging from the selection applied by the interviewees, instead, the contents of the texts include: first, the debate on the willingness to reorganise the Left and, second, the need to create a movement for the defence of human rights of everyone regardless of the political affiliation of the person to be protected from inhumane repressive measure, all the more so as they were violating rights in particularly harsh manner at the time. From the analysis of the texts about the 1980s, it emerges that Kemalism, political Islam and 'civil society' were three of the main paradigms animating the political panorama, causing sociocultural polarisation and leading to symbolic struggles for the acquisition of social consensus. In hindsight, the project of the 'civil society' turns out not to have prevailed and this is why disenchantment and disappointment emerge as the main political affects that the interviewees seem to share based on the examination of the texts and, furthermore, that have substituted the confidence and hope marking instead the debate of the 1980s.

The conditioning of the present on the past emerged also through the request for greater democratization of the political practices precisely because of two reasons. First, the model proposed in the 1980s to defend human rights universally could help to lower the current level of political confrontation characterising the contemporary society, which continues to remain highly polarised. Second, it is necessary to guarantee the respect of human rights including the freedom of expression needed to be able to tell freely about a highly politically connoted past without having to fear the consequences of repression in the present, when the radicalisation of symbolic struggles has reached once again the level of the state of repression and the contemporary deeply affects the production of texts about the past.

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