

Today's Zaman, 26 September 2008, Friday, Commentary,

Boğaziçi University and Our Reflexes by **HERKÜL MİLLAS**

When someone ever asks me “Where are you from?” these days I want to say “I am from Boğaziçi University,” or more correctly, “I am from Robert College,” as this was the name of my school in Istanbul.

It is not easy to find many like myself who come from this college. While there, I attended a preparatory class for one year, then middle and high school for six years and, finally, university for four years. During those 11 years, I matured from childhood to a married man. I am the product of this campus.

People tend to assume self-induced personality or originality in themselves, yet they are also products of their environments. Recently, whenever I ask myself, “Why am I the way I am?” I remember my school years. Those were the most critical years, the years that shaped me. When I was young I believed I had developed a character “against” that “capitalist” or “imperialist” American school. In the 1960s, the leftist movement which I was a member of tended to have such views of the world -- don't be mistaken, at that time, the Republican People's Party (CHP) was not regarded as a leftist party; rather, it was seen as a bureaucratic right-wing one. Now, I know that this school environment, which I opposed then, has shaped me, recreating “me.” The first to notice this was a close Greek friend of mine. You, he said, have “Protestant ethic.” This came as a shocking realization to me. Indeed, the American teachers -- they were in the majority -- who had influenced me had certain patterns of behavior -- in the Weberian sense. They would love their job, perform it candidly; they were consistent, fair, hard working, punctual and outspoken. What's more, there was a democratic atmosphere in the school. They would respect us all and our beliefs. This was I think the most important quality of that school.

In the Cold War years I was an active member of the Turkish Workers' Party (TİP) but no one ever bothered about it. We would invite prominent leftist figures to conferences held in the university and no one ever uttered a critical remark. Whenever I recall the things I said to teachers in class, I feel ashamed of my aggressive behavior and ill temper -- yet taking some pride for my courage in those years. In high school, with my revolutionist rage, I "humiliated" the great poet Keats, saying he was too romantic. During my university years, I made it a habit to raise objections to professors Suna Kili and Kemal Karpat in almost every lecture. I did not consider them sufficiently leftist! I frequently gave lectures to American teachers about US imperialism. Your ideas are very interesting, they would say. And I would conclude that they could beat me.

Eventually, to express my views, wrong or right, without restraint has become a spontaneous habit for me. I have come to see no concept of a "ban on expressing my beliefs" and I have started to regard freedom as my most natural right, without authoritarian restrictions taking any root in me. Actually, without being fully aware, I transformed from being a subject to being a citizen. I became an individual. More importantly, I came to value diverse ideas. What I have learned in daily practice was that everyone is entitled to express his/her opinions and act freely provided that s/he respects other people, too. But, they have not taught me this by forcing me to memorize mottos like "the sovereignty unconditionally belongs to the nation." I internalized democracy in practice. I talk of "reflexes" and I am indebted to this school for them. Democracy cannot be taught in class. What you can teach in class may be what one can say while delivering a speech on democracy. Democracy is a style of living, a behavior and a reflex. If you feel anger when you listen to your opponents and eventually ban them or try to impose restrictions on their behavior then it does not mean much that you know that sovereignty belongs to the nation or that freedom is a virtue. At the critical moment, your reflex will be despotic.

Later, in my life years after I had graduated, what touched me most was when I was invited to this school as a speaker. Among the audience were my classmates who had become professors. Aware of the fact that this would mean much to me my friends allowed me to stay on the campus, stay at the school for several days, inhaling the odors of the refectory, the library and the classrooms. There was still the atmosphere of the good old days. I gave a lecture as if speaking in Hyde Park. Then I thought that I never found the atmosphere of this university in my later years. If you take what I have just said into consideration, you can get a better picture of what Sabancı University Rector Tosun Terzioğlu, one of my closest classmates, is trying to achieve in office.

Bans in abundance?

I don't know much about him but I heard that Kadri Özçaldıran is the first non-Robert College graduate in the past few decades to become rector of this university. He was elected and we must respect this. But I feel I am entitled to talk about my school. This school has not only produced engineers, mathematicians, economists, linguists and other academics and successful professionals, it has also presented the atmosphere that Turkey has been longing for in an "eastern" setting starting from the 19th century. This is the most important ingredient of what we frequently refer to as "contemporary civilization": respect for what is different, tolerance, or in short, democracy. It is not what is written in books, but the one that throbs in our reflexes.

A democratic attitude calls for you to quiver when you hear a call or to empathize with a crying person or to feel a difficulty to eat when you see a starving hungry person -- or can you? When a school's administration meddles with the apparel of students, the quality of education will not degrade, but the quality of your graduates will. A different generation of students will come.

When I heard that there are interventions nowadays in my old school, I thought about these things and felt sorry for my school and its students. Perhaps this attitude is really being enforced by law, but if I were in the rector's shoes I would have tried to find the courage to resign from office if I could not find the courage to stand against the law. Resignation is the easiest and safest move. For me, it would be a reflexive act, I think and I hope. I would not destroy the most entrenched and special legacy of this school with an administrative decision for the sake of "law." Perhaps this is what the ethical values indoctrinated into me in school urge me to do. I have never felt any regret for being a bit different. Perhaps I have remained marginal within my wider society, but I have never felt myself "outdated" in the world.

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