

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE DISASTER

DEATH, DESTRUCTION, AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PRECARIAT

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worlds of
related
coercions
in work



Introduction: Why Stories Matter?

“About you the tale is told”
Karl Marx

As part of this project titled “In the Aftermath of the Disaster: Death, Destruction, and the Emergence of a New Precariat,” I spent a week in the Hatay region to draw up a series of photo-stories about lives sinking deeper into precarity after the earthquakes. I was astounded by what I saw, for never did I imagine that the disaster zone could still be in such a dire state. Five months have passed since the twin Feb. 6 earthquakes, but the remaining traces of the quake and the scale of destruction that greeted me in the city looked as if the tremors had happened only several weeks ago. The city remains without adequate water and power outages are frequent. There is no public transport and healthcare services are limited. Job opportunities are non-existent. The dust rising from demolition work is everywhere, not to mention the health hazards posed by debris being dumped in residential areas. The city in general is one vast scene of devastation, gripped by a sense of abandonment and desperation.

Hatay was the worst-hit among the 11 provinces affected by the earthquakes, but the authorities have yet to take the required steps to heal the wounds of the disaster. With piles of rubble and half-collapsed buildings dotting the empty streets, it is a desolate, almost ghost city today.

The sense of abandonment was what I heard the most and felt the most in Hatay. There are no public functionaries in sight to help the city return to normal. Some services are provided inside the tent and container cities, but beyond those vast gathering areas, some of which resemble military zones, no services are available in the city. Still, many residents have been reluctant to leave, wary about the future of the city and keen on preserving its unique character. They live in small encampments in parks or schoolyards inside the city, trying to survive on their own means.

All the people I interviewed in that gloomy atmosphere were incredibly eager to tell their stories, overflowing with grief and anger. As they spoke, two young local photographers shot their portraits so that they gain a clear “visibility.”

I felt that getting an opportunity to tell their stories helped the quake victims a lot. With their lives more precarious and uncertain than ever, it seemed as if they were reasserting their existence by having a voice and telling their stories. As such, telling means being.

In one of the tent cities, I made a speech titled “Why Stories Matter?” With the contributions of the audience, one thing became clear: Telling and recording the stories of the quake survivors is of vital importance – almost as vital as the interventions of a doctor.

During my one-week trip, I tried to act as a “story collector” and speak to as many people as possible to understand the “human landscape” of the region. The photo-stories presented here shed light on the experiences, predicaments and thoughts about the future of people from various communities, classes and identities. Hopefully, the publication of these stories will contribute to remedying the grievances of the quake victims. At a time when the world as a whole is becoming a worse place to live and human existence is growing more precarious amid global crises and catastrophes, the victims’ experiences plight in such disasters, one could argue, point to a shared crisis. Thus, the stories of the quake survivors presented here are the story also of our era in general. As Karl Marx said, “About you the tale is told” (De te fabula narratur).

Ahmet Ergenç

Dolunay Aker: 'Our memory will bring you to account'



Photograph: Dilay Kababiyik

Dolunay Aker, 29 years old, poet and publisher, currently unemployed. He was in Antakya at the time of the earthquake, which heavily damaged his home. He now lives in a tent in the city's Harbiye neighbourhood.

Past

Dolunay made a living as an independent publisher and editor before the earthquakes. With arts and culture activities halted, his income is gone. His life -already precarious before the disaster- has only grown more so. The apartment building, in which Dolunay and his family lived, was heavily damaged. In the first several days after the tremors, a terrible helplessness overcame the victims as they "learned what it is to be abandoned to die," he recalled. Then, NGOs and political groups arrived, stepping in to organize relief for the survivors. But those volunteers are now gone and the quake victims are on their own again.

Present

Dolunay is involved in producing a fanzine called *Waiting for the Barbarians* and organizing cultural activities as part of a collective of the same name. The underground-style fanzine, which takes its name from the homonymous novel by J. M. Coetzee, is focused mainly on literature. And "just as Coetzee's book," Dolunay says, the collective stands up to authoritarian and repressive mindsets.

The cultural activities the collective organizes in Antakya aim to heal the wounds of the disaster but also to keep the collective memory of the tragedy alive. Group members have been plastering stickers reading "Our memory will bring you to account" across the city, mounting a cultural memory resistance.

Joining this group, I made a speech titled "Why stories matter?" in a tent city. We discussed how crucial it is to tell and record the stories of the quake survivors, realizing that a literary collective could be as consequential as doctors. Indeed, telling and recording human stories in the disaster zone is as important as the medical interventions of a doctor.

Future

Dolunay insists that quake victims should not leave the region despite all the devastation and despair. In our interview, the message he underlined the most was this: "We are not abandoning this place. We hold onto our memory."

Underlying his words are widespread suspicions and fears among locals that the government will not seek to preserve the memory of the Hatay region and that reconstruction projects will efface the unique character of ancient Antakya once the city is emptied. Thus, staying on in the disaster zone has almost become a form of political and collective action. The *Waiting for the Barbarians* group runs a wide range of activities, from concerts and panels to quake-related publications and water deliveries to tent cities, keeping up a utopic resistance amid the dystopian havoc wreaked by the quakes. The group's members, however, lack sustainable incomes and face an uncertain future. Such young groups in the disaster zone and their activities deserve to be supported, including with financial means.

Berkan Aktepe: 'We should not surrender Antakya'



Berkan Aktepe, 30 years old, cinema worker. He was in Antakya's district of Armutlu at the time of the earthquake. He now lives with his family in a tent in the town of Samandağ.

Past

Before the earthquakes, Berkan lived in Armutlu and dabbled in film-making, shooting his own films and assisting in the production of others. He witnessed traumatic scenes in Armutlu in the pre-dawn hours after the first tremor. "A knife pierces my heart when I think of those moments," he said, recalling how helpless the people were in Armutlu, which suffered some of the worst destruction in the region. The disaster has left him bereft of his whole habitat – his work and neighbourhood alike. Berkan's pre-quake work includes a documentary about the 2013 Gezi Resistance in Armutlu, a district known for its political activism. As such, his documentary is an important contribution to the political memory of the region.

Present

Berkan is currently aspiring to make a short film about the quake aftermath in Antakya. As someone who knows Antakya and especially Armutlu very well, he recalls how people used to support each other in the past. In a striking description of that spirit of solidarity, he says, "To live in Antakya and be helpless was something impossible." Yet, a sense of desperation has begun to creep in him because he feels that areas such as Armutlu and Samandağ, where leftist leanings prevail, receive little to no attention. In his prospective film, he plans to depict how the people of Antakya have been holding onto their city and believes this could be a way of inspiring political hope. He says he feels obliged to show the people's resilience in the face of a big catastrophe, adding, "We should not surrender Antakya."

Future

Despite his strong attachment to Antakya, Berkan plans to move to Istanbul in the long term. He hopes to foster closer ties with Istanbul's cinema community and make films about Antakya and the quake disaster. Another idea he has is to turn his family home – one of the few partially damaged buildings in Armutlu – to a museum to keep the city's memory alive. Yet, both the museum project and the prospective films about Antakya require financial assistance. Berkan is well aware that finding such assistance is a tall order at present.

Photograph: Serpil Akçay

Merve Kababiyik: from quake victim to relief volunteer



Merve Kababiyik, 24 years old, newly graduated social services specialist, currently unemployed. She was with her family in their home in Antakya's Harbiye neighborhood at the time of the earthquake. The family now lives in a tent city in Harbiye.

Past

Fresh from university with a social services diploma, Merve was taking interviews for her first job before the earthquakes. A nursing home in Istanbul was about to recruit her but the prospect fell through with the disaster. The building in which the Kababiyiks lived was fully destroyed, but Merve managed to get out with a baby in her arms. She is left with a permanent back trauma due to the chunks of rubble that fell on her on the way out. The family moved to Alanya after the disaster, but felt they do not belong there and were back before long. Such stories recurred frequently in my conversations with the quake victims in Antakya. Many families had chosen to return after initially moving out of the disaster zone, underscoring the locals' strong sense of cultural belonging to the city – as vital as air and water.

Present

Merve volunteered as social services worker after overcoming the shock of the tremors. Along with her friend Dilay, a nurse, she founded the Harbiye Women's Solidarity Network to offer physical and psycho-social support to women. The group went to remote places, where the major charities were absent, and helped women and children in particular. Standing out in the interview with Merve was her transformation from a quake victim to a relief volunteer. Thanks to the solidarity network they established, she and her associates ceased to be passive quake victims and became active volunteers. They refused to be trapped into the moment of the disaster and found a way out to join the response to the disaster, healing themselves and helping to heal others.

Future

Merve hopes to get a job at an NGO in a while and start working as a social services staffer in one of the container cities in Hatay. The bitter irony, she says, is that she had thought of helping the Syrian refugees in Hatay but will be now helping her fellow locals who have become "refugees" in their own hometown. She plans to continue her volunteer work in Harbiye and contribute to healing the wounds of the region. For Merve, the only way of overcoming the survivor's guilt is to be able to help other survivors.

Photograph: Dilay Kababiyik

Canan Deniz: 'How do I go to school while dwelling in a tent?'



Canan Deniz, 32 years old, teacher, employment situation uncertain. She was at home in Antakya at the time of the earthquake. With her home heavily damaged, she and her family now live in tents in an orchard in Samandağ.

Past

Canan Deniz was a teacher in a school in Antakya before the disaster. She and her relatives – about 30 people – took refuge in a greenhouse to make it through the initial chaos after the tremors. Later, they set up tents in a tangerine orchard in Samandağ, creating a living space on their own means. Canan's account of the first several days of the disaster show that the government failed to help even its own public servants and teachers. No contingency plan has been drawn up for teachers in the region. They have been abandoned to their fate like everybody else. Deprived of any economic and psychological support, her life has become highly precarious.

Present

Canan said she feels unready to return to the classroom as she answered my questions outside her tent in Samandağ. The biggest problem appears to be the government's failure to outline a plan to prepare teachers to return to social life. The same goes for students, Canan said, stressing that no means of psycho-social support have been put in place. Her account led me to believe that the government has abandoned teachers to their fate, even though educators came from other regions to help students and civic society groups such as the teachers' trade union Eğitim-Sen organized some rehabilitation projects. Canan and many other teachers are now in a state of uncertainty and precarious suspense.

Future

Canan believes that her future is obscure and that the education sector, like many others, has been largely cast adrift. She has sunk into despair over the state's failure to offer adequate psycho-social support to students and teachers alike and the apparent expectation that they can keep going "as if nothing has happened." As a teacher abandoned to her fate, Canan doubts whether she could interact healthily with students, similarly abandoned to their fate, after so much tragedy and devastation. "And how do I go to school while dwelling in a tent?" she asks, worried that she will struggle to even maintain a well-kept appearance. Had the process been organized better, teachers could have taken an active role in post-quake rehabilitation efforts, but they, too, are distressed and in a precarious state today.

Photograph: Serpil Akçay

Serpil Akçay: 'The shame of having survived.'



Serpil Akçay, 30 years old, wedding photographer, presently not working. A solo dweller, she was alone in her apartment in Antakya at the time of the earthquake. She now lives with her family in tents set up in a garden.

Past

Serpil made a living as a wedding photographer before the earthquakes. The disaster left her without work. She finds herself in a precarious state as wedding parties are unlikely to resume soon in the region. The ubiquitous sight of ruins and rubble is just too heart-wrenching for her when she thinks of the pretty settings and joyful couples that she used to photograph.

Present

Serpil cherished her life as an independent single woman, but the disaster has forced her to live with relatives now. This may seem a trivial detail, but the loss of privacy is a real problem for all those quake victims who have to live in crowded groups and share basic amenities.

All the suffering aside, Serpil is anxious for having entirely lost her personal space. To ease her discomfort, she has tried to embellish her tent with as many personal belongings as possible to make it look like home. While recalling the early days of the disaster, she describes a feeling of shame – “The shame of having survived.” Such feelings – commonly known as survivor’s guilt – are widespread among the quake victims.

Serpil is determined to reopen her studio. “Butterfly Photography will be reopened.” she asserts. Her daily routine includes feeding stray cats and dogs, a fixture in Turkey’s streets. Some of those animals are newcomers to the streets – pets that have lost their owners and homes. Many others, which were already living in the streets, need caregivers, too, for the people who used to feed them are gone. The animal rights groups that flocked to the region after the disaster are unfortunately gone as well.

Future

Serpil is determined to stay in Hatay despite all the hardships. She plans to resume her photography business and continue taking care of stray cats and dogs. “Life is so hard to live and so easy to talk about,” she says with a heavy heart. That Serpil and those around her have a tough life ahead is beyond doubt, but they are bent on rebuilding their lives in their hometown rather than migrating and losing their sense of belonging.

Photograph: Dilay Kababiyik

Ali: 'I have to look after my daughter – help me'



Ali, 49 years old, construction worker, currently unemployed, lives by begging. Ali, his wife and their disabled daughter were in Samandağ at the time of the earthquake. He lost his wife and now lives with his daughter in a tent.

Past

Ali looked terrified as he recounted the night of the tragedy. He kept talking about his disabled daughter and how they managed to get her out of the building. The death of his wife appeared to have shaken his mental health as his speech became incoherent at times. Ali spoke in Arabic and a local man did the translation to Turkish. According to the translator, sometimes Ali said that his wife and daughter are at home and sometimes that he takes care of his daughter by himself. The quake trauma seemed to have weakened his connection to reality. He said he was a construction worker before the disaster but has to beg to get by because construction jobs are not available at present.

Present

Ali begs for money outside an Alevi shrine in Samandağ. He said he uses the money to buy food for his daughter. We could not quite understand whether the girl stays alone or with an attendant during the day. As I said, Ali was incoherent. He would not give his surname. Still, I decided to include him in this series of portraits because he makes us think about the quake's ravaging impact on mentally ill or unstable people. Among the quake victims I interviewed, Ali was the one in the most precarious state. Unable even to clearly describe his plight, he had no option but to beg.

Future

With his perception of time blurred, Ali failed to provide a clear answer when asked about his plans for the future. The one thing he said was, "I have to look after my daughter – help me." He apparently thought that we are influential journalists who could help him find a solution. That was painful to hear, not least because Samandağ lacks a unit to deal specifically with psychiatric cases. Hopefully, Ali's story could draw attention to the shortcomings in this field.

Photograph: Serpil Akçay

Vedia, 48, housewife. She was in her house in the Harbiye neighbourhood in Antakya at the time of the earthquake. The house was slightly damaged and remains usable, but she finds it risky to stay there and lives nearby in a tent with her three children.

Vedia: 'They want to wipe us off the map'

Past

Having spent most of her adult life as a housewife, Vedia was taking jobs as a cleaning lady to support her family before the earthquakes. Her already shaky financial situation collapsed after the disaster as cleaning ladies were no longer sought after. Meanwhile, the meaning of being a housewife has completely changed. Domestic work is now tougher than ever, if not impossible.

Vedia and her three children managed to rush out to safety after the tremor, taking refuge from the cold in a car. Water was scarce and, for three days, she gave her children just small sips of water with a bottle cap. The cries for help rising from the debris, she recalls, made her feel ashamed of her survival struggle. As she speaks, her face descends into the desperate gloom so typical of survivors recounting their helplessness in first several days of the disaster.

Present

Vedia now helps various networks and solidarity groups in her neighbourhood. Her house, which escaped the tremors with only slight damage, is open to neighbours to meet basic needs such as shower and toilet. Our conversation took place in the garden of the house. It was the first time that I was inside a home in the disaster zone, which gave me a strange feeling – a melange of tranquillity and fear. Vedia's family feels the same. They spend the days in the garden to escape the heat of the tent, but are still afraid to sleep inside the house. "I guess we won't be able to sleep at home for some more time," Vedia says.

What impressed me the most in Vedia's story was that she felt ostracized and discriminated against as a member of the Arab Alevi community in the region. She believes the government has been deliberately withholding adequate assistance from the city in a bid to wear the people down and make them to go away. "They want to wipe us off the map," she said bluntly. Some areas and neighbourhoods in Hatay have literally been wiped off the map, but many residents tend to put up a cultural and vital resistance by staying on. Vedia is one of them.

Future

Vedia holds little optimism for the future. She spoke of being in a state of limbo, with no idea what the family will do once the winter arrives. "The future is uncertain," she said repeatedly. For her, seeing only police and security guards in the neighbourhood rather than social service staffers, medics or other relief workers is not a good omen. The government seems to see the region not as a disaster zone in need of assistance but an emergency-rule area that needs to be kept under control. Still, people like Vedia are determined to not leave their native lands, no matter how precarious their situation is. Vedia aspires also to set up a network to help local women earn their livelihood by selling products made with their own means. She looks forward to support from NGOs to realize her project.

Note: Vedia's surname and photo have been withheld at her request.

