

# Culture, Social Contestation and Turkey's Failed Coup: The Rivalry of Social Imaginaries

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores the processes involved in the emergence of rival social imaginaries, as they develop in a cultural ecosystem, relating it to Turkey's failed coup. To accomplish that, it unravels how people construct their own nature by studying the social construction of reality, which is comprehensively partial to 'values.' What we see and how it is understood leads to the emergence of diverging ideological trajectories and, eventually, to social contestation as a result of competing claims. In Turkey, this ongoing contestation is reflected in the failed coup d'état. In other words, the failed coup d'état is explored as a clash of social imaginaries, in which the Gülenist social imaginary was vanquished by the AK Party's social imaginary.*

## Introduction

**O**n July 15, 2016, Turkey was abruptly thrown into gory disarray, initiated by a treacherous faction within the Turkish military, whose members unwisely, but certainly not thoughtlessly, attempted a blood-thirsty *coup d'état*. Essentially, the apparent poor planning, or theatrics, of the coup-plotters is an entirely disingenuous allegation. In fact, the usurping conspirators, with meticulous planning, orchestrated “a number of coordinated attacks in both Ankara and İstanbul in an illegitimate attempt to seize key government institutions, including the Presidential Compound and the National Intelligence Agency (MİT).”<sup>1</sup> Tanks, combat aircraft, attack helicopters and thousands of troops were simultaneously dispatched all over the country. In addition, menacing, low-flying F-16's began circling Turkey's largest urban centers. Meanwhile, military units were instructed to block the Bosphorus and Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridges, close İstanbul Atatürk International Airport, bomb the Gölbaşı Special Forces Headquarters and Ankara Police Department, suppress independent news, and apprehend President Erdoğan, dead

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Turkish military in total control.<sup>3</sup> The propaganda war had begun, and it continued with the unfolding brutality of the coup. Nevertheless, what was quite extraordinary, and ultimately proved fatal to the coup attempt, was the decisive tenacity of the Turkish people. Even as treasonous military personnel bombed the Turkish Grand National Assembly again and again, the recoiling people's representatives, from both the ruling party and the opposition, valiantly denounced the coup.<sup>4</sup> Our critical query, to which we will return, is: where did this indomitable resolve come from?

This is not all, the coup-plotters carefully calculated and executed the swift kidnapping of key senior military personnel, including General Hulusi Akar, Commander Salih Çolak, and General İhsan Ayar, forcibly taking them to Akıncı air base.<sup>5</sup> While there, these senior military officers were battered and threatened with fatal consequences if they refused to comply with the directives issued by the murky recluse Fetullah Gülen.<sup>6</sup> Trickery, ruse and perfidy characterize the deep-rootedness of the Gülen Movement, emblemized by the appearance of Ramazan Gözel, General Hulusi's Executive Assistant, on CCTV assisting the coup-plotters.<sup>7</sup> However, irrespective of the plotters' planning, embeddedness, or depth of intrigue, the hostages flatly refused to relent to their demands. The coup plotters had played all their cards, banking on quick surrender, which was not forthcoming. And, against every act of sabotage, terror and death that they inflicted, everyday men and women resisted courageously. After all, rights once acquiesced are not so easily withdrawn.

Chaotic scenes of professional military infantry raiding CNN Turk, only to be countered by unruly mobs and, soon thereafter, arrested by their own police force are surreal. Imagine heavily armed and well-trained military soldiers being scolded and manhandled by the citizenry, with the intervening police officers struggling to prevent a lynching.<sup>8</sup> In actuality, at that point, popular mobilization was already rapidly under way. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly condemned the coup as an illegal act and ordered the police

or alive. To that end, elite military commandoes flew to the western coastal city of Marmaris, where President Erdoğan was known to be on holiday, and opened fire, causing panic and pandemonium in their failed bid to capture him.<sup>2</sup> Thereabouts, the national Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) station was assaulted and an anchorwoman, at gunpoint, broadcast the bravado of the coup-plotters, declaring the

to restore order. Specifically, he used the FaceTime app on his iPhone to connect to CNN Turk and broadcast a galvanizing message: “people, everywhere, should come out on the streets and defend their democracy.”<sup>9</sup> Responding by the millions, the Turkish people flooded the streets throughout the entire country, attesting to the legion of enthusiasts ready to sacrifice for their shared social imaginary. Using the Mosques, the Tariqats, Tekkes, independent local dailies, and employing ingenious signage throughout the public transportation networks – the metro, tramways, and buses – the entire civic spectrum of Turkish society stood strong and condemned the coup.<sup>10</sup> Truly, such united resistance from all sections of society has not only revealed democracy as a non-negotiable value, but illumined the pervasiveness, and the inclusivity, of Turkey’s principal social imaginary led by the AK Party.

In the midst of this atmosphere, with resistance to the coup gaining momentum, unforeseen censure from the U.S. and Turkey’s European allies raised eyebrows across Turkey. Ridiculously, both John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State, and Federica Mogherini, the EU’s foreign policy chief, issued outlandish outbursts that President Erdoğan should respect democracy.<sup>11</sup> While millions were mourning their fatalities, this brazen issue of nonsensical statements was devastating for U.S./NATO and Turkish relations. “The clear implication, for listeners inside Turkey, was that Europe and America were more concerned for the thugs who had tried to seize the state than they were for its democratically elected leaders.”<sup>12</sup> Responding dismissively to these statements, President Erdoğan berated the West for its hypocrisy and for “siding with the putschists.”<sup>13</sup> Then, making matters worse, NBC’s Kyle Griffin falsely, and irresponsibly, tweeted that President Erdoğan was seeking asylum in Germany, citing an unnamed military source.<sup>14</sup> For Sibel Edmonds, the FBI whistleblower who heads the alternative media organization Newsbud, this was a clear instance of a ‘psy-op’ designed to be spread in order to defuse the Turkish public’s violent reaction to the coup.<sup>15</sup> Still, what is important to highlight is this did not work. The putschists, along with their co-conspirators – local and foreign – grossly misinterpreted and underestimated Turkish society by undervaluing the new social imaginary of millions of Turks. Naturally, they were surely in for a rude awakening when popular capitulation was not forthcoming; now, the Turkish peoples’ heroic resistance is celebrated as “Democracy Day.”<sup>16</sup>

Looking back, the instance that best encapsulates the failed military coup is the spectacular arrest of Brigadier General Gökhan Sönmezateş. He was the commanding officer ordered to capture or kill President Erdoğan and, in his fate, we find everything that went wrong for the putschists. Grippingly enough, consider how a decorated military officer of prestigious rank, commanding tremendous respect, broke the law – in the most scandalous of fashions, murdering civilians and trying to assassinate his democratically-elected President.

A placard bearing the words “The Nation will not bow, Turkey will not be defeated,” during the democracy watch in İzmir.

AA PHOTO / MAHMUT SERDAR ALAKUŞ

Upon his arrest, this disgraced brigadier offered to fully cooperate on a single condition: that he be permitted to divorce his wife, and have his children change their names, in order to conceal their identity.<sup>17</sup> How shockingly precipitous, and painfully conclusive, must that moment have been? Tragic, and devastating, such is the cost of his high stakes treachery. Fittingly, just as his actions claimed the lives of many, so too will he be abruptly taken away from his loved ones. All of this, though, is the consequence of his sedition – rationalized on a rejectionist social imaginary, which directly led to the untimely deaths of more than 250 people and the wounding of thousands.<sup>18</sup> Still, in his ignominy, we find what was emblematic of the failed coup: no matter the level of financial support and planning, a *coup d'état* cannot succeed without widespread commitment to the usurpers’ social imaginary, at least enough to pacify competitors.

Distinctly then, it was not poor planning that explains the coup’s failure, although that reasoning seems surprisingly ubiquitous in mainstream European and U.S. media.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the usurpers’ debacle resulted from a multiplicity of factors, including their disbelief, and ignorance, of the people’s propensity for resistance, the street power of the AK Party cadre with its exemplary mobilization, the deep resentment in the collective conscious of the Turkish people to military coups, and, most importantly, the impetus for this roused resolve, to which we initially alluded, the AK Party’s widespread social imaginary in present-day Turkey. Specifically, social imaginaries, and their competing ideological trajectories are critical to explore. For in the failed social imaginary of the Gülenist terror network, and the competence of its ideological competitors led by the AK Party, Turkey’s coup was lost.

Taylor describes a social imaginary as, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>20</sup> A social imaginary is, for all intents and purposes, a binding creed that makes existence in-



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telligible. And, among Turkey's variant social imaginaries there are some, such as those of the Gülenists, the PKK, the DHKP-C and Ergenekon, that exist on the periphery of the cultural ecosystem, and others like that of the AK Party, the CHP, and the MHP, located in its core. It is in their interaction, then, that we locate the social imaginary contestation and the machinations behind the coup fiasco. Of course, a social imaginary is only as persuasive as its committed faithful, needing '*asabiyya*,'<sup>21</sup> a 'creative minority,'<sup>22</sup> or – simply put – a team for ascendancy. That being said, the usurpers' social imaginary did not find significant resonance among the Turkish populace. Perceptibly, they either did not understand or ignored this necessity. Nor did they seem to comprehend the concurrent dynamics of culture and social contestation vital in the ongoing formation of competing social imaginaries. Hence, by deconstructing the social contestation and emergence of competing social imaginaries in Turkey, we explicate the coup's failure.

To begin, this article explores the processes involved in the emergence of rival social imaginaries, as they develop in a cultural ecosystem, and relates these processes to Turkey's failed coup. To accomplish that, it unravels how social actors, partial to their values, participate in the social construction of reality. Thereafter, what we see and how it is understood leads to the emergence of diverging ideological trajectories and, eventually, to social contestation as a result of competing claims. Then, to scrutinize the founding of those competing claims, this article employs what social constructivists describe as the binary processes of 'habitualization' and the 'inheritance of meaning.'<sup>23</sup> Looking closely, this also involves the twin idealizations of 'Interchangeability of Standpoints' and 'Congruency of the System of Relevancies,'<sup>24</sup> which are requisites for shared meaning to occur. In other words, if interchangeability, mutual understanding and commitment occur, only then does a social imaginary win adherents. And, enhancing that, Epstein's insights into brain functioning assist our discovery of how social imaginaries use 'observation, pairing, and punish/reward cycles' to propagate their narratives.<sup>25</sup>

To clarify, Epstein articulates in his article, "The Empty Brain," how the information processor (IP) metaphor, for the brain, is inaccurate. He argues the brain does not process, store or retrieve information. "We don't create representations of visual stimuli, store them in a short-term memory buffer, and

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portant stimuli (such as sirens) with important stimuli (such as the appearance of police cars); (3) we are punished or rewarded for behaving in certain ways.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, human agency constructs social reality through a process involving ‘habitualization’ and the ‘inheritance of meaning,’ with the added empirical typologies of observation, pairing, and the punishment/reward cycle. During this activity, we take in, process, and recreate phenomena, then translate and project our narratives. However, in this complex process, a singular outcome is a rarity; instead, a multiplicity of trajectories ensures diverging social imaginaries. Here, social contestation occurs regarding the result of that re-creation and how narratives and social imaginaries interact. Now, two important questions follow: 1) who are the agents competing for dominion in order to concretize those rules of the game in Turkey? 2) Upon what mandate do the competing trajectories claim legitimacy for dominion?

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then transfer the representation into a long-term memory device. We don't retrieve information or images or words from memory registers. Computers do all of these things, but organisms do not.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, Epstein reasons that, “as we navigate through the world, we are changed by a variety of experiences. Of special note are experiences of three types: (1) we observe what is happening around us (other people behaving, sounds of music, instructions directed at us, words on pages, images on screens); (2) we are exposed to the pairing of unim-

## The Social Construction of Reality

As we explore the intricacies involved in deciphering culture, including its inherent contestations and social imaginary productions, two factors – the social construction of reality and phenomenology – the study of consciousness – come to the fore. Alfred Schutz first extended this complex relationship to the social world.<sup>28</sup> Thereafter, Welch utilized both factors to address shortcomings in political culture research, while relying on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's amplification of it.<sup>29</sup> All in all, both Luckmann and Berger begin with the assumption that people 'construct their own nature' and that the transference of that construction occurs in a two-fold manner involving 'habitualization' and the 'inheritance of meaning.'<sup>30</sup> Here, habitualization means any action that is repeated frequently, becomes familiar and, thereby, is apprehended by its performer as a pattern. In other words, the process of habitualization makes it unnecessary for each situation to be articulated repeatedly. Habitualization is an enabling force, manufacturing how others perceive, yet prior to its transference, humans 'observe' and 'pair' stimuli.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, Luckmann and Berger explain the importance of phenomenology – the study of consciousness and meaning, by human agency, for the 'inheritance of meaning.' Clarifying, in order for two people to communicate, they must overcome their differences in perception of their environments. This is accomplished through two idealizations: the 'interchangeability of standpoints' and the 'congruency of the system of relevancies.'<sup>32</sup> All of this, as Welch explains, leads to the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives and the apprehension of objects and their aspects that are actually known by me and potentially known by you, conceived to be objective and anonymous.<sup>33</sup> It is here, then, after consciousness and meaning is conveyed, that Epstein's punishment/reward cycles are introduced based on the consequences of what is understood. Both aspects of 'habitualization' and the 'inheritance of meaning' are instrumental in deconstructing culture, locating social imaginaries, and deciphering social contestation in a cultural ecosystem. Moreover, in order to effectively relay how habitualization and the inheritance of meaning are idealized to social actors, Epstein's insights into psychology are essential. Social actors, based on their social imaginary, are commanding observation, facilitating pairing and punish/reward cycles, to achieve intelligibility, interchangeability and congruity.<sup>34</sup> All the variant social imaginaries in Turkey are engaged in this complex process to manufacture meaning and ensure intelligibility. Still, as will be explored later, the Gülenists did this improperly without concern for interchangeability, due to their lack of transparency and their secrecy.

There is an important precursor, prior to our observing the world, engaging in the social construction of reality, and, possibly, planting the seed of a social imaginary, namely, our values. Before human agency participates in the social

construction of reality, one must observe stimuli and it is our values that color our observation. In fact, it is through our values that we first begin to shape our perception of stimuli. Of course, the possibility of having *apriori* values or developing values after observing the world are possibilities. Looking out a window, one can perceive the sky or the dirt; the values we embrace compel us to make that choice. Hence, drawing on phenomenology, an adult person perceives the world with values already in place, and these values, in turn, color our perceptions.

## Values – Observing the World

Unquestionably, human beings come into a world of existing meanings, types, roles, ‘formulae,’ and ‘storehouses of knowledge’ or ‘significant symbols.’<sup>35</sup> Inglehart refers to this as the enduring cultural component that makes each society distinct.<sup>36</sup> This is all-important in elucidating social theory, yet herein lies the problem: in today’s globalized, multi-ethnic, multi-religious world, nation-states lack a single culture, nor is any given culture entirely monolithic. Instead, individuals are exposed to competing and contradictory stimuli in their cultural environment from the moment they are born. And, while an individual may or may not have a hand in these stimuli, they remain, in varying degrees, before, during and, even after that individual’s death. Therefore, by deconstructing social imaginaries and better understanding the values impacting the processes of ‘habitualization’ and the ‘inheritance of meaning,’ which includes observation, pairing and punish/reward cycles, we are better able to interpret those varying stimuli from which trajectories flow and social imaginaries emerge.

Further explaining, Geertz describes extant stimuli as ‘significant symbols’ which an individual uses, “sometimes deliberately and with care, most often spontaneously with ease, but always with the same end in view: to put a construction upon events through which he lives, to adjust themselves within the ongoing course of experiencing things.”<sup>37</sup> Phenomenology then sheds light on the cognitive processes involved in interpreting stimuli or the ‘significant symbols’ as experienced by human agency, in order to unravel social imaginaries. Welch highlights phenomenology to address gaps in political culture research. Chak deems it critical to learn ‘how’ to comprehend the ‘foundational’ aspect of political culture in Muslim polities.<sup>38</sup> In this article, though, phenomenology instructs our social construction of reality and informs eventual social contestation by competing social imaginaries.

More specifically, by exploring the values that color our observation and shape our interpretation of stimuli, we address the formative stage of how social imaginaries develop and transfer the social construction of reality through



'habitualizations,' and the ensuing 'inheritance of meaning.' This occurs after we observe our social environment, pair stimuli and internalize punishment/reward cycles. Now, what is important to reiterate is that habitualization, the inheritance of meaning, and idealizations are only possible if there exists an agreement, latent or otherwise, of the values – and meaning(s) associated with them, perpetuating each social imaginary. Without that, there can be no idealizations - interchangeability or congruency. In other words, where there is no agreement, the potential for conflict arises; depending on the gravity of the disagreement, this potential can lead to war. Here, therefore, analyzing the core values of each variant of the social imaginary provides clues to its mandate.

**The Gülen movement draws on Turkish reverence for Islam and the learned. Two issues are important to highlight here: the Gülenist's use of Imams to ensure the continuity of their social imaginary, and the invention of tradition**

## A Creative Minority

Until now, this article has shed some light on the processes involved in the formation of social imaginaries in a cultural ecosystem. It notes that within a cultural ecosystem, a multiplicity of ideological trajectories and social imaginaries may develop. Yet, the comprehensive directing of each social imaginary requires capable leadership. Toynbee envisions that capable leadership as a 'creative minority' – or, in other words, a small group of gifted, innovative, and industrious individuals who come together, as a team, with a shared vision and social imaginary, and respond to the challenges that their society is facing.<sup>39</sup> By doing so, and successfully establishing dominance over competing trajectories, the principal 'creative minority' ensures the supremacy of its social imaginary.

To further explain, a cultural ecosystem – or its larger corollary a civilization, may be characterized as either primitive, arrested, or dynamic.<sup>40</sup> The distinguishing features include the maturation level of the creative minority, the management of social contestation and the level of effectiveness in responding to challenges. All human societies, whether primitive, arrested, or dynamic, contain creative individuals. However, in primitive or arrested civilizations, creative individuals either cannot form a team, or, if they are able to do so, they exhaust their creative energies by engaging in destructive conflict with rivals. In essence, the inability to find commonality through inclusion or to put forth a social imaginary that resonates sufficiently with people is crippling, leading to an arrested civilization. Contrariwise, in dynamic civilizations, like-minded

The Turkish public, attempts to stop the tanks of the putschists, in Kizilay Square Ankara, on the night of July 15.

AA PHOTO / SİNAN YİTER



creative individuals join together to resolve social contestation, at least, to the extent that it disrupts cohesion. So, a dynamic civilization is described as such since its socialization has nurtured a unique cadre of leadership that responds to difficult situations, offers solutions, imperatively upholds authority, and instructs apprenticeship in the dissemination of the dominant social imaginary. This is a describes a cycle whereby the social imaginary becomes more deeply habituated over time. The widespread embrace of that social imaginary is what propels this cadre into leadership.


Elaborating, Toynbee specifies that “a natural organism is made up, like a human society, of a creative minority and an uncreative majority of ‘members;’ in a growing and healthy organism, as in a growing and healthy society, the majority is drilled into following the minority’s lead mechanically.”<sup>41</sup> Basically, this minority of superior, dedicated and hard-working people sets the standard for others to follow. And, these unique individuals effectively respond to social challenges and encourage others to follow suit, almost instinctively, through a process called ‘mimesis.’<sup>42</sup> What this means is that by solving society’s pressing and difficult issues, a creative minority is rewarded by the majority imitating them, sharing their vision and embracing their social imaginary.

Taking a step back, creative minorities are responsible for the actualization of their social imaginary. Particularly so, since, the manner in which a creative minority imparts their vision and indulges in social contestation impacts the totality of the cultural ecosystem. Here, Letwin’s explanation of the word ‘culture’ is insightful, literally meaning ‘handing down.’<sup>43</sup> For a social imagi-

nary constitutes a conception of how things should be done, as well as a manner of understanding and dealing with extant stimuli; it comprises a complicated cluster of criteria and skills. And, resultantly, each creative minority is responsible for thoughtfully deciding, and skillfully directing, what to 'hand down.' In other words, creative minorities perpetuate their social imaginaries through apprenticeship.

Plainly speaking, each creative minority must ensure that their own house is in order and, thereafter, advance the vitality of their social imaginary through apprenticeship. Purposely, each group normalizes their social construction of reality into recognizable and shared traditions. "This is why the personal association of parent-child, teacher-pupil, has been considered essential to the transmission of a tradition."<sup>44</sup> However, this is not so easy or straightforward as it may seem. Social imaginaries and the traditions they inculcate remain coherent not through changelessness but through continuity. For that to occur, it must be expressed with considerations, both historic and contemporary, the management of which is not altogether quite clear. For instance, the Gülen movement draws on Turkish reverence for Islam and the learned. Two issues are important to highlight here: the Gülenist's use of Imams to ensure the continuity of their social imaginary, and the invention of tradition.<sup>45</sup> In their now seized Yamanlar High School in Izmir, hand casts were found, reportedly of Fetullah Gülen.<sup>46</sup> If true, this would be a clear indication of Gülenist authority figures using local the Turkish tradition of kissing hands to signify reverence. The discovery of these hand casts, for many Turks, was seen as an outrageous adulteration of a cherished tradition.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the continuity of tradition is dependent on the teaching skills of the creative minority, which recognizes the embeddedness of certain values, but should not require mere imitations of historic performance or style. The misuse of a tradition could very well result in mockery and the opposite of the intended effect, in this case, of enhancing reverence or supporting the spread of the social imaginary.

Accordingly, there is an inherent disharmony in culture *per se*, as it emerges through social contestation, between the competing values, traditions, and given cultural context. Moreover, the emergence of creative minorities vying for ascendancy adds to the dissonance. Of course, throughout history there have been those rare epochal paradigm shifts that alter the values of a people. Taylors refers to that phenomenon in Europe citing the intellectual impact of Locke and



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## **Gülenists hold little in common with the other social imaginaries in Turkey, which is why they lack transparency and rationalize murder. Their secrecy prevents them from engaging, in a straightforward manner, with other trajectories since it is based on zero-sum binaries**

Turkey – not just their formation, but how they navigate relations with each other – and explore the currents and crosscurrents that animate their history. Every creative minority must multi-task, confronting internal challenges within their social imaginary and competing with others in their shared cultural ecosystem. Whether Gülenists, ISIS, the Revolutionary People's Liberation party (DHKP-C), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kemalists, *Milli Görüş*, *Süleymançı*, *Naqashbandi-Khalidi*, *Semer kand*, or the AK Party cadre in Turkey, among others, each belongs to and generates a distinctive social imaginary. Granted, each cooperate at a level dependent on their creative leadership.<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, without cooperation or minimal agreement, the social imaginary becomes destructive towards the totality of the cultural ecosystem. This is how the Gülenists' rationalized 'cheating' in examinations, based on their belief, real or otherwise, that corruption would prohibit their rightful advancement.<sup>51</sup> Or, how the HDP rationalizes PKK violence against the Turkish state due to perceived historical injustices.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, even the radical left in Turkey advocates rebellion against the state due to its social imaginary, which teaches extremist Marxism.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in each of these instances, through the rationalization of polarizing behavior that negatively impacts others, the challenges and responsibilities of creative minorities and their social imaginaries are underscored. Creative minorities, in fact, are the social actors commandeering social contestation.

Grotius.<sup>48</sup> Still, that rarity involves social contestation between the old and new, in which victory depends on how authoritatively the creative minority establishes its new social imaginary. What is important to accentuate is the manner in which the creative minorities – elites, teachers or Imams, play a decisive role in establishing the coherence of their traditions.<sup>49</sup>

Essentially, in light of this, one needs to closely investigate the distinctive social imaginaries in

### **The Rivalry of Social Imaginaries**

The natural affinity between culture and social contestation, often neglected, is a profoundly vital criterion for evaluating the rivalry of social imaginaries in a cultural ecosystem. Without it, accurately interpreting the variables or characteristics that impede or enhance the social commons, according to the

divergent narratives of social actors, is difficult.<sup>54</sup> Knowing the mind, and appreciating the deepest, most intimate values of one another, is essential for mutual understanding. And, this allows for the potential of reconciling differing thought patterns and behaviors. Notwithstanding, it is prudent to recognize that social contestation occurs not only between different peoples, societies and nations, but, most importantly, inside them. In other words, 'culture functions as a contested sphere' in which it is constantly evolving, transforming and undergoing adaptation through human agency – both bygone and extant.<sup>55</sup> This internal social contestation is vividly pronounced in Turkey, and elsewhere throughout Muslim polities, although the conundrum is how to manage it and whether the competing social imaginaries are even in an ideological position for that to take place.

To be more clear, social contestation is a given, due to divergent social imaginaries and creative minorities in any society, yet zero-sum binaries between them is not.<sup>56</sup> Here, then, two variant social imaginary pathways emerge dependent on their management by creative minorities: 1) Discerning competing social imaginaries, within the cultural ecosystem, but abiding by cohesion, or 2) Rejecting competing social imaginaries and any framework of commonality or agreement. In the first instance, the social imaginary, even while differing from other trajectories, accepts a framework of maneuverability composed, for example, of elections, police, the judiciary, authority figures, etc., in society. In the latter, social contestation becomes destructive by not accepting any framework of agreement. Consequently, a social imaginary arising within a discursive community that rejects a common framework exists on the peripheries or outside the frontiers of the cultural ecosystem – as in the case of the PKK, Ergenekon, the DKHP-C or the Gülenist coup-plotters in Turkey, leaving forcefulness, subterfuge or duplicity as their only recourse. These peripheral social imaginaries, since they do not have enough people, or enough social resonance, to exert their imaginary on the populous at large, rationalize violence.

To reiterate, it is not necessary for diverging social imaginaries to exist outside a cultural ecosystem. All that is necessary is for participating ideological trajectories, within a cultural ecosystem, to have a minimal level of shared agreement or commitment to the 'rules of the game,' so to speak. Every effort should be made by the principle creative minority to ensure that variant social imaginaries are not pushed to the brink. When such efforts are not made, or are unsuccessful, and a social imaginary accepts no basic framework from which to coexist with others, then that social imaginary becomes a counter-culture or rebellious movement. It views competing social imaginaries in zero-sum binaries, holds no moral standard across imaginaries, and is only able to obtain power through brute force. In Turkey, the Gülenists, Ergenekon, the DHKP and the PKK are examples of such rebellious and counter-cultural social imag-

inaries, working against cohesion in their cultural ecosystem. By doing so, they employ subversion and sabotage to actualize their agendas, representing what Jean-Paul Sartre calls ‘mauvaise foi’<sup>57</sup> - bad faith, or insincerity towards their own professed highest values.<sup>58</sup> Be that as it may, these rival social imaginaries operate in private and in public, and are embedded in social networks and institutions, competing for ascendancy. Concerning Turkey’s failed coup, had the usurpers done their homework properly, they would have realized that their attempts at habitualizations had not led to substantial interchangeability or congruency. Not only that, the Gülenists hold little in common with the other social imaginaries in Turkey, which is why they lack transparency and rationalize murder. Their secrecy prevents them from engaging, in a straightforward manner, with other trajectories since it is based on zero-sum binaries. Moreover, their lack of transparency and existence in the peripheries of Turkey’s cultural ecosystem further alienate them. In fact, in a twisted reality, the Gülen movement, while growing as a reaction to Kemalist repression, grew in fear, apprehension and duplicity. Now, it oddly requires these elements, without the conditions that initially led to them. Hence, the Gülenists developed in resistance to authority, and continued this resistance even when authority was in the hands of their erstwhile allies.

Understanding the rivalry of social imaginaries requires a recognition of the transformative processes utilized by conflicting social actors, i.e. creative minorities, as they develop their unique narratives. Together, social actors and their consequent intellectual trajectories, utilize the experiential typologies of observation, pairing and the punishment/reward cycle, to intake, process and recreate phenomena, translate and project their narratives, and create their social imaginaries. It is here, then, that social contestation occurs as to what the result of that re-creation entails and how the social imaginaries will interact. Social contestation or ideological rivalry occurs regardless of circumstance, but its severity depends on whether the social imaginary exists as a core or periphery, inside or outside a cultural ecosystem.

Henceforth, analyzing cultural rivalry in society leads to an appreciation of the manner in which human agency and social contestation formations materialize to contend with the direction of ‘culture’ in a given society – whether through social media, oral history, film, art, education, through imams, secular teachers, popular figures, or literature.<sup>59</sup> Essentially, this includes the manner in which each trajectory and its proponents produce their imaginaries. Broadly speaking, this is what any thorough exploration of ‘cultural analyses’ should discover – what is important for that cultural ecosystem, distinguishing competing social imaginaries, which institutions are perpetuating divergent cultural repositories and what are the impending consequences of those trajectories. Yet, no matter what the competing trajectories are, the momentarily resolved yet ultimately unresolvable conflict of culture, is aptly described

by De Tocqueville's explanation of the French revolution, relevant, also, for the Arab Spring and the awe-inspiring Turkish triumph for democracy:<sup>60</sup> "elle dure encore" – it still continues.<sup>61</sup>

Plainly speaking, culture is continuously being contested; reconciliation, even if attained, is only momentary. In fact, the content and process of 'handing down' culture or ascertaining 'how things are done' includes the competing trajectories and social imaginaries of both winners and losers, as an outcome of historic contestation, which inevitably will continue to evolve. Therefore, what amounts to the totality of a given cultural ecosystem – including its different social imaginaries and extant learning and sharing – is a matter of continuous social contestation and rivalry.

Clearly then, rival social imaginaries, particularly in regard to orientations to stimuli, phenomena and political objects in a society, remain important and often distinct. Cultural analyses are effective for understanding those distinctions. During this ongoing process of disputation, a principle social imaginary becomes dominant by overcoming internal challenges towards cohesion, and external challenges confronting society at large. It is difficulty, rather than ease, that provides the stimulus. Yet that difficulty must not be too great. In fact, Toynbee argues "that the challenge must be a golden mean; an excessive challenge will crush the civilization, and too little challenge will cause it to stagnate."<sup>62</sup> Toynbee identifies five challenges that assist creative minorities in improving performance and sharpening their wit: "a hard environment; a new environment; one or more "blows," such as a military defeat; pressures, such as a frontier society subjected to frequent attack; and penalizations, such as slavery or other measures in which one class or race is oppressed by another."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, all of this helps the creative minority strengthen its resolve in order to achieve supremacy for itself – and this competition with other social imaginaries, ultimately, leads to civilizational growth.

Toynbee reminds us that, aside from those 5 challenges, there is another requisite for the maturation and ascendancy of a creative minority. For that, neither military prowess, political expansion, advances technology, agriculture or industry, are reliable criteria. These are external indicators, whereas what is

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Police officers, together with a large crowd, take over a tank after the surrender of the last remaining coup plotters in the morning of July 16, Bosphorus Bridge.

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ARIF HÜDAVERDİ  
YAMAN

important is what he calls “etherialization.”<sup>64</sup> Toynbee explains that etherialization occurs when the energies of a society are directed away from external material objects, towards challenges that arise from within and require an *inner or spiritual response*. In Arabic, the closest approximation would be a belief in the unseen – a movement away from the physical to the metaphysical world.<sup>65</sup> Secondly, adding to that, the principle social imaginary achieves dominion when it follows the Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest. In short, Darwin suggest that individuals, “who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.”<sup>66</sup> Here, clearly, Darwin describes the ‘fittest’ as those embodying moral excellence – exemplified by social solidarity and concern for the group, not physical prowess.

By virtue of its domination, the ‘winning’ principal social imaginary sets out the rules of the game and establishes the momentary supremacy of its rendition of local values over others. In Turkey, the AK Party has done precisely that. Stability ensues when competitors acknowledge those basic values and acquiesce to the results of that internal competition, respecting the institutions that adjudicate them. Of course, the winning social imaginary – in this case the AK Party, needs to ensure that its base is constantly invigorated, and not ‘resting on its oars.’<sup>67</sup> Instability, or chaos, arises when competing social imaginaries do not have agreed upon ‘rules of the game,’ view the ‘state’ as an enemy,



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the people as 'illiterate,' and rely on coercion to enforce their will. Here, Fetullah Gülen's diatribe blasting the Turks who fought on the streets against the usurpers as 'fools' is indicative of his appraisal of the people.<sup>68</sup> Is it any wonder that the masses are not attracted to his social imaginary? Belittling people, and then self-righteously expecting them to follow a grandiose message, are exactly what will prevent the embrace of a social imaginary.

### Conclusion

This article explored the processes involved in the emergence of rival social imaginaries and social contestation, relating these processes to Turkey's failed coup. It did so by unravelling how people construct their social reality, identifying its partiality to the values of social actors. That is, what we see and how it is understood leads to the manifestation of diverging ideological trajectories and, eventually, to contending social imaginaries led by variant creative minorities. Thereupon, inevitably, social contestation proceeds as a result of competing claims, the irreconcilability of which deteriorates into wide-ranging levels of instability, or, as in this study, a *coup d'état*. What is occurring, though, is chronic rivalry, not just of culture as a continually contested sphere, but between organized social competitors, for legitimacy, authority and dominion. The magnitude of this sociopolitical contestation is seen in the ascendancy of a 'principal' social imaginary, which, in order to secure durable equipoise, necessitates inclusion, establishes mutually agreeable 'rules of the game' and offers maximum breathing space. Still, the recognition and management of diversity requires each social imaginary to commit to a broad-based framework of agreeability. Otherwise, it functions as a dictatorship, or as a rebellious force, or counter-culture phenomenon, leaving recourse to political power only through compulsion.

To begin, and deconstruct the precise sequences involved in the formation of competing ideological trajectories, this article utilized Luckmann and Berger's terms outlining the social construction of knowledge: habitualizations, the inheritance of meaning, and the idealizations of interchangeability and congruency.<sup>69</sup> Collectively, these contribute to the evolution, expansiveness and contention of social imaginaries. First, habitualizations are an enabling force, manufacturing how others should perceive. Second, inheriting meaning – or trans-

## The failure of the Gülenist social imaginary to establish dominion arose from its general disdain for millions of Turkish citizens

only possible if there exists an underlying agreement, or tacit awareness, of the requisite values enabling understanding. This is accomplished through idealizations of the ‘interchangeability of standpoints’ and the “congruency of the system of relevancies.”<sup>70</sup> Together, with Epstein’s insightful critique of how the human brain uses “observation, pairing and punish/reward cycles” to propagate their narratives, we intricately deconstructed some of the factors involved in the complex formation of social imaginaries.<sup>71</sup>

Essentially, by exploring social imaginaries, this article presented an unusual perspective on the origins and failure of the Turkish coup. Studying a social imaginary offers insights into how human agency constructs social reality to intake, process and recreate phenomena, and then translate and project their narratives. We wanted to understand, how the Gülenists, for instance, knowingly or unknowingly engaged in this process. Strictly speaking, social actors craft their social imaginaries by manufacturing perceptions, or attempting to create perceptions, that will elicit particular observations, pairing and punishment/reward cycles. This we do, every day, almost instinctively. Yet, notably, in this complex process, a singular outcome is a rarity; in fact, culture is not monolithic. Instead, within a cultural ecosystem, a multiplicity of ideological trajectories and social imaginaries may develop. And, the comprehensive management or directing of each social imaginary requires capable leadership or, as Toynbee describes, a ‘creative minority’ - with a shared social imaginary.<sup>72</sup> This creative minority, resultantly, directs its social imaginary and enthusiasts, in a manner that will either exacerbate or decrease the fissures and differences in society - leading to equipoise or agitation.

To put it plainly, social contestation in any cultural ecosystem is a given, due to divergent social imaginaries and the creative minorities leading them. However, these leading figures must decide on the manner in which they will engage with others. Resultantly, they must choose either of two variant pathways: Firstly, to engage in the growth, development and ascendancy of their social imaginary, even if in disagreement with others, by committing to the shared responsibilities and of basic values within the cultural ecosystem; Or, secondly, they engage in the growth, development and ascendancy of their social imaginary, but reject other social imaginaries and any framework of commonality or agreement.

In the first instance, the social imaginary, even while differing from other trajectories, accepts a sense of responsibility and framework of maneuverability – elections, the judiciary, authority figures, the rule of law, etc., in society. Therefore, it exists, and navigates, in the cultural ecosystem and commits to three tangible responsibilities in the triangulation of their social imaginary. Firstly, to ensure recognition of extant stimuli in a cultural ecosystem; Secondly, to navigate their social imaginary in a responsible manner with other ideological trajectories. Thirdly, they establish a basic modicum of agreement with other social imaginaries for the collective well-being of society. By doing so, each attests to their social responsibility and maneuvers in a way that recognizes the extant stimuli, and values, permeating society. Correspondingly, they develop agreeable ‘rules of the game’ – certainly not in opposition. Their obligations facilitate human agency to traverse this complex process, project its narratives and reinforce its ideological trajectories and, meanwhile, responsibly engage in social contestation. Here, again, Giroux notes the importance of recognizing the “performative workings of culture” that are instrumental for “expanding the possibilities of a democratic politics, the dynamics of resistance, and the capacities for social agency.”<sup>73</sup> Essentially, ‘creative minorities’ must work in that performative capacity, for the management of diversity and regulating of social contestation.

Contrariwise, if there is no commitment, or agreeability, and the social imaginary accepts no basic framework from which to exist with others – or feels rejected – then it becomes a counter-culture or rebellious phenomenon. It views competing social imaginaries in zero-sum binaries, holds no moral standard across imaginaries, and is only able to obtain power through brute force. Consequently, social contestation becomes disparaging and that social imaginary exists on the fringes, periphery or outside the frontiers of the cultural ecosystem – as in the case of the PKK, Ergenekon, the DKHP-C or the Gülenist coup-plotters in Turkey, leaving forcefulness as their only recourse. These troublemaking social imaginaries are rebellious and counter-cultural, working in the shadows, against cohesion in their own cultural ecosystem. In fact, some of these groups are at such odds with wider society, that in Turkey they deny that a coup even occurred.<sup>74</sup>

In light of all this, the exploration of the failed Turkish coup reveals some strengths and weaknesses of the variant social imaginaries engaged in social contestation. Specifically, the failure of the Gülenist social imaginary to establish dominion arose from its general disdain for millions of Turkish citizens – calling them stupid, and their cryptic, non-transparent, cult-like initiations that included caricatures of Turkish tradition.<sup>75</sup> Because of that, there were little efforts at cultivating habituations, the inheritance of meaning, or the idealizations required for mutual comprehension to follow, since they view people as sheep – or the illiterate, unworthy multitude, that are unable to truly

understand what God, or His representatives, want.<sup>76</sup> This disempowering idea lies at the root of authoritarianism, whether in politics or religion. The idea that only a few people can understand, inevitably leads to an aversion towards transparency, which directly impacts recruitment.

Lastly, this article acknowledges the *modus operandi* by which contesting social forces engage in rivalry by utilizing power to structure and systematize diverse systems of representation, production, consumption, and distribution. Those insights clarify how symbolic and institutional forms of culture and power are mutually entangled in fashioning dissimilar identities, modes of political agency, and, even the social world. To quote Giroux, “within this approach, material relations of power and the production of social meaning do not cancel each other out but constitute the precondition for all meaningful practices.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, those meaningful practices, and the ever-present potentiality for social contestation, explicate the difficulties of managing diversity. Indeed, such a confluence of contesting cultural repositories, social contestations, knowledge production and human agency, is clearly displayed in Turkey’s failed *coup d’état*.


Our social world is rife with all sorts of intellectual tussles; recognition of the need to open spaces for that social contestation within any singular cultural ecosystem is essential to facilitate equipoise. In many respects, culture is a product of a contested past, between varying social imaginaries, negotiating their way to the present through the value orientation of creative minorities. However, social contestations and their impact are, also, entirely immediate. Providing space upon which Turkish societies’ unique social contestation, between secular, religious, or other human agents may take place ensures its widest possible embrace. By widening the ideological embrace, and maintaining the neutrality of state institutions in fulfilling their objective, which is to serve people, we realize what it takes to manage, if not resolve, social contestation in order to achieve a modicum of social equilibrium. This civil society objective results in an active, politicized Turkish civil society, aiming for social cohesion and aspiring for reconciliation that has already matured enough to allow divergent trajectories ‘breathing space.’ If that breathing space were not provided then the whole social milieu would begin to suffocate, and the consequences, imaginably, are atrocious.

Much has already been written on the centrifugal forces pitting ideological rivals against one another in Turkey, or the wider Middle East. Far from impeding growth, internalizing and constructively utilizing diversity furthers the maturation of a vibrant, just civil society. Arguably, that too, is built upon an agreement of the Rawlsian conception of ‘justice as fairness’ in which a critical liberal ethos of ‘maximum liberty, minimal inequality’ is rationally mandated throughout society.<sup>78</sup> In other words, social contestation is a given – certain-

ly not something to be afraid of or nervous about, though it ought to be regulated by a commitment to maximizing individual freedoms, including equivalent opportunities, and minimizing inequalities of wealth, class and power. Indeed, these initiatives, if adequately institutionalized, take the steam right out of any potential radicalization, disenfranchisement or zero-sum social imaginaries that function on the outskirts of society. Moreover, by empowering civil society, the dominant or ascendant social imaginary becomes the defenders against any would-be usurper, as in the case of Turkey.

In Turkey, a wide-range of diverse social imaginaries from the nationalist MHP, the committed secularists of the CHP, along with various Sufi Brotherhoods – the *Naqshbandi*, *Süleymançı*, *Işıkçı*, *Nurcu* and *Milli Görüş*, condemned the coup attempt.<sup>79</sup> This list, certainly, is not exhaustive, but it reinforces the idea that each of these social groupings have created their unique social imaginaries, and compete for meaning and aim to recruit adherents, by navigating *inside* Turkey's cultural ecosystem. As indicated, some of these social groupings form political parties, such the CHP and MHP. Others contribute to civil society through charitable organizations and Sufi Brotherhoods which, collectively, provide the backbone of the AK Party.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, the reason for this societal unanimity, was largely the consequence of the AK Party's inclusivity, drawing people from all segments of Turkish society into its fold; secularists through their fiscal policies, disaffected Kurds through their Islamic credentials and multi-ethnic character; Nationalists through their emphasis on 'Ottoman Pride' and 'Turkish Culture;' and the Sufi Brotherhoods thorough shared Islamic values. This is the AK Party's real strength; it has successfully commandeered this magnificent diversity towards a commonality.

By acknowledging and providing space for cultural contestation, managed by broad adherence to a sense of equality and protection of individual liberties, the productivity of a cultural ecosystem is enhanced. The results of that social contestation is the advent of a principal creative minority, based on its intellectual prowess, etherialization and moral excellence. Every effort should be made by the principle creative minority to ensure that variant social imaginaries are not pushed to the brink. Of course, this implies espousing plurality, and enduring what we may find distasteful. But, since social cohesiveness occurs when people listen to one another, the initial distastefulness is understood as a necessary sacrifice in order to achieve equipoise. This, in fact, is a rather obvious point; that for equipoise and social equilibrium to occur there needs to be a careful, systematic effort made to allow 'space' – political, economic,



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and cultural – for divergent social actors. In essence, this does not necessarily imply accepting everything under the sun, irrespective of the moral or ethical boundaries of a society, yet its broadening embrace needs to be as wide as possible to give as little rationale as possible to those on the fringes or otherwise radicalized to extremes. There is no other alternative to resolve the long-standing polarization, or prevalent zero-sum mentality, currently gripping Middle Eastern society.<sup>81</sup> ■

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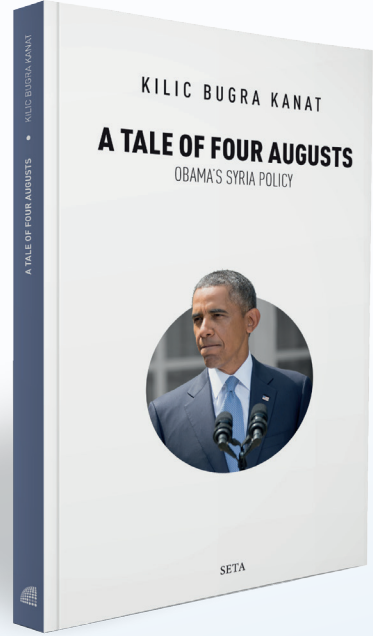


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