

A Midsummer Night's Coup: Performance and Power in Turkey's July 15 Coup Attempt

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Abstract Occurring at a time when military interventions appeared to be a matter of the past, the coup attempt of July 15, 2016 left a major mark on Turkish society and politics. This article approaches the July 15 coup attempt as a contingent and transformative event and investigates how symbolic processes helped determine its immediate outcome as well as its cultural, social, and political consequences. Linking the sociological literature on events with social performance theory, the study argues that the putschists' ineffectiveness in projecting legitimacy and power in the critical hours of the coup attempt significantly contributed to its failure. The retrospective construction of an authoritative "Narrative of July 15" in the following weeks, on the other hand, enabled the government to implement specific institutional changes in the cultural, economic, and political domains. The study proposes a two-step analysis for the cultural construction of political events and suggests that social performance theory provides useful analytical tools for tracing the course and explaining the outcome of this process.

Keywords July 15 · Military coups · Social performance · Events · Turkey

On the night of July 15, Turkey experienced one of the most memorable events in its recent history. At about 10 pm, a series of unexplainable incidents followed one another, starting with the blocking of the bridges over the Bosphorus by the troops. Television stations and news websites reporting the incident assumed that this must be a precaution against a terrorist attack—Istanbul had seen four deadly suicide bombings within the last year—but soon enough the blockade was followed by news of fighter jets flying low over Ankara and reports of gunfire near several government buildings (Firat 2016).

The mysterious incidents were finally given a name at around 11 pm, when the prime minister announced on live television that the government was facing an uprising led by a group within the military. Something most citizens no longer considered within the realm of the possible in Turkish politics was taking place in front of their very eyes: a military coup

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attempt. For the next seven hours, Turkish citizens witnessed an extraordinary struggle where nothing less than the government's monopoly of violence was at stake.

The ensuing hours saw the reading of a coup statement on public television, armed struggles for the control of key government buildings, and perhaps most traumatic for Turkish democracy, the bombing of Parliament by fighter jets controlled by the putschists. Following President Erdoğan's call on live television, tens of thousands of citizens went out into the streets and faced the tanks and soldiers. By the end of the night, 240 of these anti-coup demonstrators would be killed and 2,191 injured. By about 6:30 am, most pro-coup soldiers had surrendered, and the coup attempt ended in decisive failure.

Almost from the moment the incidents were labeled a coup attempt, some observers characterized the events of July 15 as "theater" (cf. Lusher 2016). They used this expression to suggest that the coup attempt was a hoax, a simulation staged by the government itself (or allowed to proceed despite prior intelligence) to mobilize mass support for Erdoğan and justify a state of emergency, which in turn would allow him to accomplish his long-desired goal to establish a presidential regime (Coşkun 2016a, b). This conspiracy theory was built on the assumption that Erdoğan and the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), the ruling party, were the main beneficiaries of the failed coup, and lent credence by the "inexplicable sloppiness" of the putschists (cf. Çandar 2016). Strikingly, Fethullah Gülen, the cleric whom the government identified as the mastermind behind the coup attempt, suggested that the ruling party staged the coup in order to provide a pretext for the impending purges (Finger 2016).

This article will analyze Turkey's July 15 coup attempt and its aftermath as a series of performances on the public stage. My aim, however, is not to partake in the political debate on the coup's authenticity, but rather to argue that the dramaturgical aspects of the coup attempt and of government actors' responses to it centrally mattered for the course, immediate outcome, and further consequences of "July 15." To that end, I will analyze (1) symbolic struggles between the putschists and government actors on the night of July 15 and morning of July 16, and (2) the ensuing reconstruction of "July 15" by government officials and media actors, from the perspective of social performance theory. I will use Turkish and English-language newspaper accounts, video recordings of news and debate shows on television, and opinion pieces and books by journalists and academics published online or in print between July 15, 2016 and February 15, 2017 to reconstruct the relevant events and the social performances of key actors.

As a model of cultural pragmatics, social performance theory stresses that all social action involves the communication of meaning to others. And in the sphere of politics, it emphasizes that success in politics—the acquisition of power either for its own sake or for other ends (Weber 1946)—often depends on successful social performances.

Jeffrey Alexander's cultural-pragmatic theory identifies six essential elements of social performances. Collective representations (1), structured by codes and narratives, come into play both as background cultural structure and foreground script. Background representations refer to historically established patterns of meaning in a given society. Scripts, on the other hand, are foreground texts; they selectively draw from background symbols and arrange these in a manner oriented towards dramatic action. Actors (2) who perform the script on the public stage seek to communicate the intended meaning and project a sense of authenticity to the audience (3), the observers of the performance. Whether the latter will decode the performance in the way desired by its producers, however, depends on a complex constellation of factors, including the effectiveness of the *mise-en-scène* (4), the organization of dramatic action in time and space.

All performances to some extent depend on the means of symbolic production (5), which range from props that actors use on stage to communications media that allow the performance to reach the audience. Finally, social power (6)—conceived broadly as the differential distribution of economic resources, political power, and social status—might delimit the range of background symbols, performances, and actors that are allowed on the public stage and restrict the public expression of critical interpretations (Alexander 2011, 83–84; Alexander 2004b, 529–533).

In contemporary politics, where performances must be attuned to the structural demands of mass media; their authenticity, verisimilitude, and legitimacy are routinely contested by opponents through counterperformances; audiences are fragmented and potentially cynical; and critics mediating between performances and audiences abound, performative success requires command over key resources as well as considerable cultural and dramaturgical skill. Access to the means of symbolic production is necessary but not sufficient for performative success; all elements of performance—background symbols, script, actors, *mise-en-scène*, and audiences—must be seamlessly brought together. A performance succeeds when the audience is persuaded by its message, psychologically identifies with the actors, and experiences catharsis (Alexander 2004b, 531). When, on the contrary, the observers find the actors inauthentic—“acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience” (Alexander 2004b, 548)—and their message artificial, the performance fails.

Some observers of Turkish politics have noted that symbolic politics has played a central role in the power struggles between Islamic parties and the military in the past. Jenkins (2006) has characterized the civil-military relations in the first term of the AKP rule as “a shadow play of symbols and oblique rhetoric,” likening them to a symbolic box match where each side made careful moves against the other, only to draw back when the anticipated consequences of intransigence would contradict its interests. Altınordu (2016) has argued that while earlier Islamic parties’ failed incorporationist performances paved the way for interventions by the secularist military and high judiciary, the AKP’s successful projection of a mainstream political identity on the public stage between 2002 and 2011 allowed the party to achieve political incorporation. Taking these culturally sensitive studies of civil-military relations in Turkey one step further, this paper will focus on the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, a case where this relationship has taken the form of a sensational event involving violent confrontation.

But does social performance theory offer a suitable analytical framework to understand and explain military coups? Various studies have used cultural pragmatics to analyze the central and relatively autonomous role of the cultural in democratic political life, including in election campaigns (Alexander 2010), presidential politics (Alexander and Jaworsky 2014; Mast 2012), public commemorations (Rauer 2006), and transitional justice (Goodman 2006). But military coups, one might object, are of an entirely different nature. Coups involve a non-democratic struggle for state power, i.e., for the monopolistic control of the means of violence, and their success or failure depends on the threat and exercise of physical coercion. In other words, coups speak a language of tanks and bullets rather than codes and narratives, and thus are not amenable to cultural analysis.

Studies of wars “as patterned meaningful activity” (Smith 2005, 7) and of terrorism “as a particularly gruesome kind of symbolic action in a complex performative field” (Alexander 2004a, 88) show, however, that political actions that resort to violence rather than democratic persuasion have a central cultural dimension. In line with these studies, this article will reject the conventional opposition between coercion and culture, or violence and meaning, and argue that culture and performance are patently important to violent, non-democratic struggles over

state power. As Wagner-Pacifici (2010, 1368) emphatically puts it: “[E]ven actors and institutions that claim monopolies over violence must *claim* monopolies over violence.”

Yet even if one were to recognize the symbolic dimensions of sustained violent struggles such as wars and terrorism, one might still argue that a contestation of state power that comes unannounced and unfolds quickly such as a coup attempt leaves no room for social performances. Typically, the fate of a coup is decided relatively quickly: The putschists either take over key state institutions and establish control over the means of violence overnight, or they fail. In such a rapidly unfolding event, no actor has the time and opportunity to craft an elaborate script and put on a performance. This is in contrast to political events extended over weeks or months typically studied by social performance theorists, where adversaries vie for symbolic dominance through a series of social performances and counterperformances, be they democratic ones such as election campaigns or violent ones such as wars. Thus, there is ample reason to assume that social performance theory might not be a suitable tool to explain the course and outcome of military coup attempts.

The following analysis will seek to demonstrate that this is far from being the case. I will argue that in the case of the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey, social performances played a central role in (1) the relatively limited span of time when the outcome of the coup attempt was still indeterminate—the contingent moments “when things could literally go one way or another” (Wagner-Pacifici 2000, 2)—and (2) the construction of the authoritative narrative of the event in the weeks following the putsch. In the first stage, they helped determine whether the coup attempt would succeed or fail; in the latter stage, they helped determine the cultural, social, and political consequences of the coup attempt.

Events and Social Performances

From the perspective of social participants, events often appear as self-evident units of history. As cultural and comparative-historical sociologists have extensively demonstrated, however, occurrences do not dictate their own boundaries, labels, and interpretations. The designation of an event involves the selection and linkage of a set of temporally distinct occurrences, their packaging under a recognizable label, and their signification as remarkable and transformative. As Jason Mast (2006, 117) underlines, events constructed in this manner mark collective consciousness and continue to serve as reference points for social and political agents after their occurrence:

An “event”...is a set of narratively interconnected occurrences that achieves “generalization,” drawing a public’s attention away from the specificity of everyday life. As unusually significant meaning constellations, events become lasting points of demarcation in the flow of collective time and retain the potential to inform ongoing social experience.

Of course, events do not construct themselves; it takes meaning work by social actors to mark the boundaries of an event, craft the narrative that links and attributes an overarching meaning to a set of occurrences, and establish this “bound” event as a collective point of reference to sanction particular actions and institutional transformations. This also means that some potentially relevant occurrences are excluded from the boundaries of the event; alternative plausible narratives with different protagonists, antagonists, and plots remain unformulated or marginalized; and various possible courses of action are rendered inconceivable or

inappropriate. Thus, the way an event is culturally constructed has a major influence on its social and political consequences. Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2010, 1352–54) acutely underlines this point in her study of September 11 as a “restless event”:

Where and how do we look at the numerous actions we call “September 11”?... Do we bind the event by limiting it to acts perpetrated on that one day in 2001, a day in which startled news commentators progressed unevenly from describing airplanes flying into buildings as “accidents” to describing them as “incidents” and then as “terrorist attacks”? Do we bind the event by limiting it to acts taking place in the air on that day, or do we include acts taking place in buildings in two major U.S. cities and on the ground in one rural field in Pennsylvania? Do we include speech communications occurring in these spaces or those transmitted (as images and discourse) across electronic media?...[S]ocial and political agents have alternately incorporated within September 11 the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the legitimization of the torture of “enemy combatants,” and the militarization of public health structures and activities. Where September 11 begins and ends is no small question...[T]he business of event framing is part and parcel of the continuing effect flow of events.

Besides their culturally constructed nature, cultural and comparative-historical sociologists have identified at least two other important attributes of events. The first is that events are contingent: While they unfold against the background of existing structures, their course and outcome cannot be completely predicted, as they involve the rupture of structures, human agency, cultural creativity, and chance (Sewell 1996; Wagner-Pacifici 2000). Secondly, events are transformative: They lead to durable transformations of cultural, social, and political structures (Sewell 1996). Cultural processes of signification arguably constitute the thread that connects these two dimensions. Emergent and post-hoc interpretations of an event by participants and publics do not merely represent social agents’ efforts to make sense of it—they also play a significant role in determining the event’s course, immediate outcome, and long-term consequences. As Sewell (1996, 861) puts it, “[S]ymbolic interpretation is part and parcel of the historical event.”

Social performance theory offers powerful analytical tools to study these symbolic-interpretive processes, which constitute an essential dimension of contingent, transformative events. Do the observers consider the actors in question authentic, their actions legitimate, and their messages valid? Do these actors appear to be in a position of power or weakness? Does the audience psychologically identify with the script and experience catharsis? As I argue below in the case of “July 15,” the answers to these questions help determine whether potential participants will join the action or remain bystanders, which side pivotal individuals and groups will take, and who will reap the benefits of public legitimacy. Thus, the contingency of events partly lies in the contingency of the social performances they entail.

Moreover, the dominant public interpretation of the event constructed through post-hoc social performances has a major influence on the cultural, social, and political transformations that follow from the event. This retrospective construction determines what courses of action are seen as sensible or inappropriate, what kinds of ideas are considered relevant or outdated, which symbols appear to be compatible with collective identity or sacrilegious, and what sorts of changes in social and political arrangements seem necessary—and thus “pave[s] the way for specific actions and institutionalizations” (Wagner-Pacifici 2010, 1353). Therefore, analyzing post-event social performances is crucial for understanding an event’s transformative effects in the longer term.

The following sections will focus on two major stages in the construction of “July 15” as an event. While these two phases cannot be neatly separated, each has distinct but equally important political implications. The first stage includes the social performances of the putschists and top government officials during the contingent course of the coup attempt on the night of July 15 and morning of July 16. As I will demonstrate in detail, the performances of the putschists who sought to project a sense of power and control and claimed legitimacy for their actions failed. This performative failure significantly contributed to the failed outcome of the coup attempt.

Following the failure of the coup, government officials, pundits, and media actors engaged in the construction of an authoritative “Narrative of July 15.” Their meaning work built on the cultural elements that had been invoked by top government officials on the night of the coup attempt, but articulated them in new directions through a more fully fleshed-out narrative. Despite emerging after the fate of the coup attempt had been conclusively determined, this retrospective construction of the event paved the way for major cultural, social, and political transformations in Turkey.

The Coup Attempt: Performing Legitimacy and Power

“We are Focusing on the Possibility of an Uprising”

Around 10 pm on the evening of July 15, Turkish news media interrupted their regular programming to report that gendarmerie troops—a military police unit—had blocked access from the Asian to the European side on the bridges over the Bosphorus. Given that Istanbul had seen a number of terror attacks in the preceding months, most media outlets and citizens assumed that this must be a precaution against a terrorist threat (Firat 2016, 35–36). Shortly thereafter, however, reports arrived of military jets flying low over Ankara and gunshots from near several government buildings in the city, leading the news stations to talk about a “flurry of activity.” Finally, at around 11 pm, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım declared in a live phone interview on the news channel NTV, “We are focusing on the possibility of an uprising” (Firat 2016, 37).

Yıldırım defined the uprising as the work of a minority within the military acting outside the chain of command and underlined the determination of the government to resist and defeat the coup attempt. The event unfolding before the public was a struggle between the democratically elected, legitimate government representing the will of the people on the one hand, and dark forces that had illegally appropriated the means of violence under their care on the other. This characterization of the situation would set the tone for the ensuing performances of government officials throughout the night:

The government of the Turkish Republic, the government elected by the citizens, by the nation, which represents the will of the nation, is in charge. It would quit only on account of a decision by the nation, this must be known. (Firat 2016, 37)

At this early point, it was impossible for the media and the citizens to ascertain the balance of power between the government and the putschists. Aware of the significance of the public perception of the coup’s prospects of success, Yıldırım sought to appear calm and confident and project a resilient government. Referring to the putschists’ undertaking as “madness,” he underlined the irrational nature of the coup plotters and undermined their chances of success:

Our citizens should remain calm. But they should know that we will never allow acts of madness such as this...We will never tolerate illegal actions that would suspend democracy. Our security forces have been mobilized, we will do what needs to be done. (Firat 2016, 37)

Yıldırım's message on live television finally allowed the media to label the event. Until then, the succession of unusual incidents reported from Istanbul and Ankara remained unexplainable occurrences causing confusion, raising question marks, and begging for a definition, as evident in this statement of a newscaster on live television: "We are witnessing developments that make our blood run cold, which we don't know how to describe or explain" (Firat 2016, 36). With Yıldırım's declarations, the puzzling occurrences were linked and logically organized according to the familiar label of a "military coup attempt."

From this point on, media actors and citizens knew that what they were reporting and witnessing belonged to that category of a historic event, which would leave a mark in collective consciousness and was likely to have serious consequences. This cultural classification also activated collective memories of previous coups in Turkish history—including the coup of 1960, the military intervention of 1971, the coup of 1980, and the "postmodern coup" of 1997—which would inform subsequent audience interpretations as background representations.

Beyond its content, the interview revealed that the prime minister had not been captured and was not on the run. But given that Erdoğan had increasingly consolidated executive power in his person in recent years (Cizre 2016), the outcome of the night could not be predicted as long as his location remained unknown. Nearly half an hour after Yıldırım's declarations on television, an e-mail message sent from the General Staff informed journalists that the Armed Forces had taken over the state administration (Firat 2016, 43).

The Coup Statement

At around 12:15 am, the agents of the coup finally communicated with the public. The putschists had taken control of the public broadcaster TRT, and, for the first time since the beginning of the events, they conveyed a message that could illuminate their identities and motivations. The coup statement was read live by a news anchor a few times and then played in a loop until government forces managed to suspend the TRT broadcast altogether.

As the only substantial verbal communication of the putschists to the public, the meticulously worded coup statement merits a close reading (Firat 2016, 81–83). The putschists identified themselves as the "Peace at Home Council," and a passage in the statement cited Atatürk's phrase, "Peace at home, peace in the world." The president and government authorities, the statement claimed, had fallen into "heedlessness, perversion, and even treachery," alluding to a well-known quote from "Atatürk's Address to the Turkish Youth." The putschists signaled through these references that they were motivated by the values upheld by the founding figure of the secular Turkish republic. The statement justified the military takeover with reference to the special mission of the Armed Forces as "the protector of the republic," a notion which had played a central role in previous military interventions in Turkish politics.

At the same time, however, the language of the coup statement contained significant differences from the discourse used by the military in its two most recent interventions, the "post-modern coup" of 1997, which toppled the coalition government led by the Islamic

Welfare Party, and the “e-memorandum” of 2007, which sought to prevent the election of Abdullah Gül, a politician with a pedigree in political Islam, to the presidency. The central trope used by the military on these occasions had been the “reactionary threat” against the secular republican regime (Altnordu 2016). The July 15 coup statement carefully avoided this vocabulary, which had been discredited in the intervening decade, and avoided overt references to the AKP’s religious orientation. Instead, the putschists simply referred to the government’s “ideological motives” in restructuring state institutions and promised that they would institute “basic universal human rights for all citizens without discrimination on the basis of sect or ethnicity.” Thus, while courting republican sensibilities, the statement mostly signaled commitment to a non-militant version of secularism.

The central theme of the coup statement was the violation of laws and subversion of the judicial system by the president and the government. The declaration opened with a reference to “the systematic violations of the constitution and laws.” The next passage describing the dire state of the country underlined that “the rule of law based on the separation of powers has been practically destroyed” and asserted that Turkey “has become a country ruled by autocracy.” Even the passages on widespread corruption in the state bureaucracy reiterated this emphasis on the rule of law: “The justice system which would fight against this has been rendered dysfunctional.”

In line with this diagnosis, one of the most important goals of the coup was “removing the *de facto* obstacles against a constitutional state.” The putschists also promised that “all citizens’ freedom of expression, property rights, and universal basic rights and freedoms are guaranteed by the Peace at Home Council,” and heralded the making of a new constitution. The statement thus made the case that the government’s systematic disregard for laws deprived it of democratic legitimacy and justified the military intervention with the imperative to reinstitute the rule of law: “The government which has lost its legitimacy has been dismissed. All persons and institutions engaged in treason will be held accountable in authorized courts of law.”

Besides claiming legitimacy for the coup, another essential objective of the statement was the projection of power. Like government officials, the putschists seemed aware that the public perception of the coup’s prospects would influence its actual outcome. Thus, they sought to convey the sense that they had the situation under control. The coup statement claimed that the government had been effectively overthrown and that “the Armed Forces [had] taken over the administration.” Moreover, the putschists proclaimed martial law and declared a curfew. Performative speech acts in the Austinian sense, these utterances were meant to bring about the condition that they named (Austin 1975). Yet they also exposed the coup plotters to potential displays of weakness: If these illocutionary acts were not “satisfied” through “world-to-word fit” (Searle 1983), this would significantly hurt the credibility of their performative projection of power, and in turn, their actual prospects of success.

Erdoğan Strikes Back: People vs. Tanks

At the time the coup statement was read on public television, Erdoğan had still not made a public statement and his location remained unknown. The sustained silence by this foremost representative of state authority led to speculations about his status and threatened to compromise the government’s claim that it was still in charge of the state apparatus. At around 12:25 am, Erdoğan finally spoke live on CNN Türk via a FaceTime video call, as the news anchor Hande Fırat held the screen of her iPhone to the cameras. This appearance, his

subsequent FaceTime interview on NTV, his statement to local reporters in Marmaris—recorded just after midnight but broadcast by news channels after these two appearances—and, finally, his press conference in Istanbul shortly after 4:00 am allowed the government to dominate the public stage throughout the early morning hours.

Erdoğan's social performances, like those of the putschists, sought to achieve two goals: claiming legitimacy (and challenging the legitimacy of the putschists), and projecting power (and downplaying the power of the coup forces). Like the prime minister, the president emphasized that the coup attempt was the work of a minority within the military and did not follow the chain of command, challenging both the legitimacy of the putschists and their chances of success. He recurrently underlined that the government and he himself as president had been elected by the people, and thus represented the national will: "This is an uprising against the national will... In this country, there is no power above the national will on a human plane."¹ Against the challenge posed by the putschists, the president reminded the public that in a democratic polity legitimate political authority is determined by elections: "Turkey has a government that has been elected with the nation's votes; it has a president who has been elected with the nation's votes" (Firat 2016, 160–161).

While stressing the legitimate nature of the government's and his own political authority, Erdoğan depicted the coup plotters as enemies of the people engaged in treacherous behavior: "What we have at hand is a movement of treachery, an uprising. And they will, of course, pay very heavily for this act of treason" (Firat 2016, 159). The putschists abused their public office by using the armaments under their care against the government: "These are not their tanks; these tanks have been entrusted to them. They have breached this trust" (Firat 2016, 161).

Vis-à-vis the smaller but crucial audience of generals and ordinary soldiers who were waiting to see who would prevail, Erdoğan resorted to a combination of paternal persuasion and the threat of retribution. His warnings not only aimed to discourage the generals involved in the plot, but also sought to prevent those who had not yet joined a side from supporting the coup:

I'm also addressing our armed forces from here, especially the honorable generals of our armed forces. I want the honorable generals to stand firm against those who, regrettably, have suffered from a loss of honor. These will pass, but you are here to stay.²

Erdoğan also appealed to ordinary soldiers who had been mobilized by the coup plotters:

I'm calling on the rank and file, on all our soldiers: You are our children... By no means can we accept that you point your weapons at the people standing before you right now, your mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters... If you point these weapons at the nation that has given them to you, you will pay a heavy price for it. You must rectify this wrong immediately. (Firat 2016, 160)

The president's public statements throughout the night stressed that the judiciary would take action against the putschists and that the police had already begun making arrests. His most ingenious move from a performative perspective, however, was to call people out to the streets to face up to the soldiers. In his first television appearance of the night, Erdoğan asked citizens

¹ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/erdoganin-darbe-girisimi-gecesi-yayinlanamayan-konusmasi-40165560>. Accessed 18 January 2017.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZP2ayhDzCI>. Accessed 17 October 2016.

to crowd city squares and airports, delineating the putschists as a group outside of and opposed to the nation:

I invite our nation to the squares of our cities, I invite them to the airports. Let us gather as a nation in squares, in airports, and let this minority group come with their tanks and cannons and do what they will do to the people there. I haven't recognized any power above the power of the people until today, and we would never recognize such a thing hereafter. (Firat 2016, 101)

Erdoğan repeated this call in his media appearances throughout the night: “We will be hand-in-hand with our people in the squares of our cities, and we will give the requisite lesson to those who perpetrated this uprising”.³

Following his call, tens of thousands of anti-coup demonstrators went out to key locations where soldiers and tanks were stationed, creating a binary representation of the event as people (civilian, unarmed) versus tanks (naked force). Thus, the government produced the perfect metaphorical embodiment of its claim to stand with the people against a villainous force. In a crucial turning point in the contest for legitimacy between the putschists and the government, the immediate performative efficacy of this imagery trumped any theoretical arguments about the government's lack of legitimacy due to its disregard for the rule of law. Around the same time, with an order of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, *muezzins* began to recite prayers from the loudspeakers of mosques throughout the country and called people out to the streets in defense of the government, marking the anti-coup campaign as a religious struggle (Tremblay 2016). The putschists' declaration of a curfew, in the meantime, lost all meaning.

This new situation left the putschists with an impossible dilemma: If they shot at the anti-coup demonstrators, they would have to abandon any hope of receiving public support and carry out the coup by exercising violence and instigating fear alone. But if they refrained from acting against the people confronting the tanks and defying the soldiers, they would be giving up any credible claim to power and control, which in turn would spell the end of the coup attempt. Thus, Erdoğan's move meant that the dual requirements for performative success, the projection of legitimacy on the one hand and the display of power on the other, were no longer attainable for the putschists.

The coup forces responded to this situation in an inconsistent manner. In some locations, most dramatically at the Bosphorus Bridge, soldiers fired against unarmed demonstrators and plowed through the crowds with tanks, giving rise to a general moral outrage against the putschists. In other locations where the soldiers did not respond, people climbing on tanks and disarming soldiers produced displays of impotence on the part of the putschists, which attested to the immanent failure of the coup attempt.

Finally, after 2:30 am, the putschists began to bomb the Turkish Parliament while dozens of members of parliament met in this institutional symbol of national sovereignty to oppose the coup. Nearly an hour later, fighter jets controlled by pro-coup pilots started to fly low over Istanbul, producing sonic booms that created the illusion of a series of bombings across the city (BBC Türkçe 2016). While these constituted some of the most traumatic moments of the night for the city's millions of residents, most demonstrators refused to leave the streets. The desperate violence unleashed by the coup forces—who knew they were on the verge of decisive failure—further validated the

³ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/erdoganin-darbe-girisimi-gecesi-yayinlanamayan-konusmasi-40165560>. Accessed 18 January 2017.

government script, which fundamentally relied on a binary opposition between the putschists and the people.

Why Did the Putschists' Performances Fail?

Background Culture

We do not yet possess reliable data on the motivations and thinking of the coup plotters. Their actions on the night of July 15 and morning of July 16 demonstrate, however, that they expected to gain the support of military officers, politicians, and citizens concerned about the rising authoritarianism of Erdoğan and profound social and political instability under the AKP government. Yet this calculation failed to consider the strongly critical attitude that had emerged in Turkish political culture against the political role of the military over the last decade (Aydınlı 2012). A series of institutional reforms between 2001 and 2004, initiated as part of Turkey's EU accession process, had significantly reduced the power and visibility of the military in the political sphere, which had in turn contributed to a change in citizens' as well as officers' understandings of the military's proper scope of authority (Yınarç 2016). Highly publicized court cases against the perpetrators of the coup of 1980 (Letsch 2014) and against those involved in the military intervention of 1997 (*BBC News* 2013), as well as two high-profile, controversial trials against alleged plotters of unrealized coups against AKP governments (Jenkins 2011), marked military interventions in democratic politics as criminal acts. Public acknowledgement of atrocities committed by the junta of 1980 and pious citizens' experiences of discrimination following the "postmodern coup" of 1997 further contributed to this negative signification of coups.

Thus, despite their strong criticism of Erdoğan and the AKP, the leaders of all major opposition parties took a clear public stance against the coup attempt on the night of July 15 (Cumhuriyet 2016a). Following the call by the speaker of the Parliament, MPs from all parties rushed to the parliament building and delivered anti-coup speeches (Bozkurt 2016). Politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and celebrities condemned the coup attempt on news channels and in social media while it was still unfolding (CNN Türk 2016a, b). These actors argued that a military takeover was not an adequate solution to the country's problems and referred to Turkey's traumatic experiences with coups d'état to suggest that a successful outcome for the putschists would have disastrous consequences for Turkish society.

Conditions for Social Performance

On July 15, the plotters sought to repeat a simple coup ritual by adopting the script and mise-en-scène of Turkey's 1960 and 1980 military coups. On those occasions, taking control over the public broadcaster had been a crucial step for the putschists. What their present-day counterparts failed to consider was that—despite significant limitations on press freedom—the Turkey of 2016 had a vital public sphere with a complex media structure and decentralized opportunities for information sharing provided by social media, unlike in the era of these earlier coups characterized by the state monopoly on broadcasting. Aslı Aydıntaşbaş (2016), a columnist writing in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, thus derided it as a "foolish initiative that issued a statement on TRT in imitation of the 1970s."

Despite the putschists' demand that all television channels in the country must broadcast the coup message, no major media organization other than the occupied TRT followed this

command. While most entertainment channels continued their regular programming, news channels provided uninterrupted coverage of the events and aired live interviews with government officials. As a result, while controlling considerable means of violence—35 airplanes, 37 helicopters, 74 tanks, and 246 armed vehicles were used during the coup attempt (Cumhuriyet 2016c)—the putschists did not have access to the means of symbolic production for most of the night.

Thus, as the putschists asserted that they represented the Armed Forces as a whole and claimed that they had taken over the state administration, top commanders and government officials cast serious doubt on these claims in live interviews. While Erdoğan did not have immediate access to television cameras, his aides were able to transmit a live video feed to major news channels by using a mobile app, allowing him assert control over the narrative at a critical moment. Finally, the justifications put forward in the coup statement were almost simultaneously countered by anti-coup voices, who condemned military coups as inherently anti-democratic and showed support for the democratically elected government in traditional as well as social media. In a last-ditch attempt to change this course of events, the pro-coup soldiers arrived with a helicopter at CNN Türk's Istanbul headquarters at around 3:30 am and suspended its broadcast (Firat 2016, 143–157; CNN Türk 2016b). At that point, however, the government already had complete control over the narrative.

The putschists thus failed to tackle the performative challenges brought about by the reflexive nature of contemporary publics in general and the complex structure of traditional and social media in present-day Turkey in particular. In other words, the coup plotters did not take into consideration major “transformations in the conditions for social performance” (Alexander 2011, 82) that had taken place in Turkey over the last three decades. This fatal failure crippled the putschists' efforts to project legitimacy and power in the critical hours of the coup attempt, and thus played an important role in its eventual failure.

Empirical Credibility

The putschists had not secured the support of the majority in the military, let alone the higher command, and their organizational capacity was not sufficient to capture key government officials and buildings. Yet, they seem to have calculated that by getting an authoritative statement read on public television, flying fighter jets and helicopters over Ankara and Istanbul, and sending large numbers of soldiers into the streets—many conscripts were not aware that they were participating in a coup plot—they would manage to project an image of total control. This projection, in turn, would lead government actors to acquiesce out of fear, convince top generals and other officers to join the coup, and help mobilize the support of politicians and civil society actors who were strongly critical of the increasingly authoritarian president and the policies of his party. As Jenkins (2016) has observed:

[T]here is...too great a disparity between the forces that participated in the attempted putsch and those that would have been needed for it to succeed. The most logical explanation is that the initial actions of the putschists were designed to serve as a catalyst, in the expectation that others who were not part of the original conspiracy—amongst both the military and the general public—would then rally to their support.

In other words, the coup organizers had hoped for a cascading effect in their favor; instead they got one that worked against them, as it gradually became apparent that many of their key claims did not live up to empirical reality.

At around 11:30 pm news agencies and several news stations reported that the putschists were holding the chief of the general staff and some top generals against their will (Firat 2016, 44–45). While the coup organizers repudiated these reports in an e-mail message sent to journalists (Firat 2016, 70), shortly thereafter First Army Commander Ümit Dündar confirmed in a live phone interview that the coup was not supported by the chain of command and would soon be suppressed by the uninvolved units in the military (Bianet 2016a). These developments seemed to support the government's contention that the coup attempt was the undertaking of a contingent acting outside the chain of command and not an enterprise of the Armed Forces as a whole as the language of the coup statement suggested.

The putschists' claim that they had taken over the government was also open to contestation. While the TRT building had been occupied and gunfights around several government buildings continued, there was no credible proof that key state institutions such as the General Staff, the National Intelligence Organization, and major ministries were under the control of the coup forces. Moreover, not a single major government figure appeared to have been arrested by the putschists. When Erdoğan spoke live on television after midnight, the putschists' claim to have overthrown the government was largely discredited.

Non-involved officers' perceptions of the balance of power between the government and the putschists were of particular importance for the outcome of the coup attempt. Recent work by political scientists on military coups underlines the importance of intra-military dynamics and suggests that during a coup attempt officers not directly involved in the plot typically join the side they expect to win. Thus, expectations about the coup's outcome often have a self-fulfilling effect (Singh 2014). As a Turkish journalist noted in hindsight, this was also the case on the night of July 15. According to Ahmet Şık, a critical group within the Turkish military consisted of "wait-and-seers, who waited until the last moment thinking, "What if I join," "What if I stand apart." This latter group changed its position in view of the course of the coup" (Kalafat 2016).

In short, then, putschists' performances began to falter as the empirical credibility of their script was seriously called into question. This failure to effectively project power during the contingent unfolding of the event in turn significantly contributed to the failed outcome of the coup attempt.

Lack of Performative Persistence and Authenticity

By blocking the bridges over the Bosphorus, buzzing jets over major cities, occupying airports, stationing tanks and soldiers in public spaces, firing on anti-coup demonstrators, and bombing major government buildings, the putschists sought to project power throughout the night. Tanks, fighter jets, and soldiers' uniforms and weapons served as props, and the country's two largest cities functioned as stages for these performances. Compared to these displays of power, however, the coup plotters' performative efforts to project legitimacy were limited to a single statement read on public television. While the coup statement was carefully worded and expressed its arguments in a persuasive language, it was no match for the large number of performances government officials and other anti-coup actors staged throughout the night.

A significant shortcoming of this performance was its failure to project a clear identity. The plotters of the coup hid their identities behind the obscure title “Peace at Home Council,” which raised serious suspicions about the authenticity of their intentions. These doubts were further strengthened when Erdoğan identified the Gülenists—an Islamic movement—as the plotters of the coup, as the statement’s repeated references to Atatürk’s legacy now potentially appeared as attempts at dissimulation.

Strikingly, this major legitimacy-seeking production by the putschists was a performance-by-proxy: The coup statement was read by a regular TRT newscaster, which meant that the public was not presented with a single face or name that belonged to the real actors behind the coup. This notable absence of authentic actors who would make the putschist script “walk and talk” on the stage (Alexander 2011, 102) made it difficult for the audience to identify psychologically with the coup organizers. On the other side of this symbolic struggle, government officials—many of them skillful actors with a great deal of stage experience—presented a clear account of their identities and motivations, making it easier for the audience to accept them as authentic and their messages as valid.

The Retrospective Reconstruction of the Event: The Narrative of July 15

Sewell (1996, 844) argue that for occurrences to qualify as historical events, they must result in “changes in cultural schemas, shifts of resources, and the emergence of new modes of power.” These transformations in turn are conditioned by dominant understandings of what the event was and what it means (Wagner-Pacifici 2010). While a longer-term perspective is required to fully assess the structural transformations instigated by July 15, in the seven-month period examined in this article, the coup attempt had already had drastic cultural, social, and political consequences. The government’s policies that led to these transformations were justified and in some cases rendered necessary by the “Narrative of July 15,” which was constructed by government officials with the aid of media actors in the days and weeks following the coup attempt.

In his live television appearances on the night of July 15 and morning of July 16, Erdoğan readily pointed to the “Parallel State Structure” as the responsible party for the coup attempt, and to Fethullah Gülen as the mastermind behind it. The term “Parallel State Structure” referred to the Gülenists (or the *Hizmet* movement, as its supporters prefer to call it), a vast international network of schools, foundations, corporations, and media outlets, overseen or inspired by the charismatic Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen. Having left Turkey in 1999 on the pretext of receiving medical treatment in the United States, Gülen had lived at a compound in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania since.

The AKP government and the Gülenists had been close allies up until the end of 2010. Most significantly, they collaborated in two major lawsuits that led to the arrest of hundreds of retired and active army officers on charges that they plotted to overthrow the government and in the constitutional referendum of 2010, which changed the composition of the country’s high courts (Şık 2016). Together, the lawsuits and the constitutional amendments removed the obstacles posed by secularist state actors against the political incorporation of the AKP (Altnordu 2016).

Once the joint struggle against the Kemalist establishment had accomplished its goals, however, the two entities began to clash over several issues. When police investigators—allegedly Gülenists—detained individuals closely related to the AKP government in a corruption probe in

December 2013, Erdoğan waged an all-out war against the network. The president declared that Gülenists had systematically infiltrated key state institutions and received their orders from the network's leadership rather than from their legitimate superiors within the state bureaucracy (Şık 2016). Soon afterwards, the group was dubbed PDY/FETÖ (short for Parallel State Structure/Fethullahist Terror Organization) and was officially listed as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state (Bostan 2015). The period between 2014 and 2016 saw an extensive purge of Gülenists from the police force, the judiciary, and civil service, and a crackdown on media outlets associated with the network. A similar purge was expected to take place within the armed forces in the summer of 2016 (Filkins 2016).

In his press conference in the early morning of July 16 at Istanbul's Atatürk Airport, Erdoğan expressed with renewed certainty that the FETÖ was responsible for the coup attempt. He then outlined the building blocks of the narrative which government officials and media actors would reiterate and elaborate in the following days and weeks:

This group, which cannot digest our country's unity, togetherness, and integrity, which cannot accept the unity and togetherness of our nation, is the Parallel State Structure itself, as I have been saying for a long time. As a result of a forty-year-long process, this structure has found its way into our armed forces, our police organization, and other institutions of the state; it has masqueraded and cloaked itself in all sorts of ways, and has come up to the present in this way. (Firat 2016, 159)

Erdoğan thus asserted that the Gülenists had been systematically infiltrating and assuming control over key state institutions for four decades, and depicted the July 15 coup attempt as the culmination of this process. Having emerged victorious from the struggle against the putschists, he heralded the impending purges that would eliminate the Gülenists from these state institutions:

In accordance with the notion that every cloud has a silver lining, this rising, this move is a great blessing from God. Why is this a great blessing? Because this move will be conducive to the cleansing of our armed forces which must be immaculate. (Firat 2016, 159)

This narrative outlined by Erdoğan on the night of the coup attempt would repeatedly be circulated in pro-government and mainstream media over the following weeks and achieve dominance in the Turkish public sphere: Everything started in the early 1970s, when the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen initiated a long-term plan to infiltrate key state institutions. Through dormitories and student apartments they maintained all over Turkey, the Gülenists targeted and recruited successful students from poor provincial families, and over time brainwashed them to create an army of blindly obedient followers. Gülenists placed in key positions stole the exam questions for entrance into military schools, police academies, and civil service, and thus placed a large number of followers into the police force, military, and the judiciary. Once in these state organs, the Gülenists were quickly promoted, and over time, the network came to control the most strategic positions in these institutions.

The Gülenists, according to this narrative, first conspired to overthrow the AKP government through the corruption probes of December 2013. When the government held its ground and took action against them, the organization plotted the coup of July 15, taking their orders from Gülen himself. However, this plot was defeated by the heroic resistance of the people who took to the streets in defense of popular sovereignty. Thus, those who lost their lives on the night of July 15 were "martyrs of democracy." And now, the defeated Gülenists would be removed from the state apparatus and the FETÖ's sources of finance and recruitment would be rooted out.

The Narrative of July 15 had all the features of a successful script (Alexander 2011, 84). Like all conventional narratives, it had a beginning (the initiation of the Gülenist plot to infiltrate state institutions), middle (Gülenists amassing power, conspiring against the government through the corruption probes), and an end (the climactic coup attempt and its resolution through the defeat of the Gülenists). Its agonistic plot developed from the tension between a set of pure protagonists (Erdoğan and the AKP) and polluted antagonists (Fethullah Gülen and the FETÖ) and possessed the compelling quality of a political thriller, as noted by Filkins (2016, 60).

Most elements of this narrative were not improvised from scratch. Erdoğan and many AKP politicians had extensive experience with military interventions from their involvement in earlier Islamic parties and their time in government (Altınordu 2016). As a result, they had become well versed in a critical discourse that emphasized the will of the nation, expressed through elections, as the exclusive basis of legitimate political authority. The discourse on the Gülenist Parallel State Structure, on the other hand, had been honed in the course of Erdoğan's crusade against the network after the corruption probes of December 2013, and had been used to justify the purge of Gülenists since then. The narrative constructed by government actors in response to the coup attempt of July 15 wove these two discursive strands together.

Social Performances and the Democratic Public Sphere

While political power often is acquired and operates through successful social performances, it might also manifest itself through the imposition of external constraints on the performative field. As Alexander (2004b, 532) has written:

Not all performances, and not all parts of a particular performance, are allowed to proceed... Who will be allowed to act in a performance, and with what means? Who will be allowed to attend? What kinds of responses will be permitted from audience/observer? Are there powers that have the authority to interpret performances independently of those that have the authority to produce them?

These questions outline the conditions for a democratic public sphere from the perspective of social performance theory.

One of the reasons the Narrative of July 15 achieved dominance in the Turkish public sphere was that its primary carriers were political actors in powerful positions with access to the means of symbolic production. But mainstream media actors also crucially contributed to this symbolic domination by circulating the government's narrative without much journalistic distance. While revelations about the secret aspects of the Gülen movement proved very popular with viewers and readers—of particular interest was Gülen's hypnotic hold over his followers, many of whom believed he was the Mahdi⁴—the inherent appeal of the story alone cannot explain the pervasive compliance of mainstream Turkish media organizations. More importantly, reproducing the Narrative of July 15 in a loyal manner was a means of staying on good terms with a government known for its crackdowns on the media, especially given that the post-July 15 state of emergency allowed it to bypass regular legal procedures.⁵

⁴ The messiah figure in Islamic eschatology.

⁵ The Freedom House has categorized Turkey's press freedom status as "not free" since 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/turkey>. Accessed 20 October 2016. Extensive information concerning limitations on press freedom in Turkey before and after the July 15 coup attempt can be found in the country page of Reporters without Borders (RSF): <https://rsf.org/en/turkey>.

Over the following weeks, news shows and evening-long debates on news channels were almost exclusively devoted to further revelations about the organizational structure of the FETÖ, its methods for infiltrating state institutions, and conspiracies against judges, prosecutors, police chiefs, and journalists who had sought to unveil its illegal activities. For example, between the 15th and 19th of August 2016, the themes discussed in the debate show *Türkiye'nin Gündemi*, broadcast every weekday on CNN Türk from 9 pm into the late hours of the night, included the recruitment of women into the FETÖ (Monday), the removal of FETÖ members from the judiciary system (Tuesday), historical parallels to the FETÖ and its failed coup attempt (Wednesday), the FETÖ's infiltration into the police force (Thursday), and the relationship between the FETÖ and the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) (Friday).⁶

Any deviance from ritualistic recitations of this narrative not only met the outrage of pro-government actors, but also was subject to rigorous policing by television moderators and newspaper editors. This dynamic was clearly revealed on a prime-time debate show on Habertürk TV on July 25. On the program, Nursen Mazıcı, a history professor, argued that Erdoğan's call to citizens to take to the streets on the night of July 15 put lives in danger and was, therefore, utterly irresponsible. Mazıcı was immediately interrupted by Rıza Saka, a pro-government lawyer, who questioned the historian's patriotic credentials:

Mazıcı: What was said here? Go out into the streets, prevent the coup. How can you make people go into the streets, in front of the tanks? 240 people died, was the final count 240?

Saka: 248. 248 people were martyred, they did not die.

Mazıcı: 248 people who—to use your expression—became martyrs...

Saka: Don't you see it in this way?

Mazıcı: Allow me, allow me...

Saka: You said, "to use your expression." Are you looking at things from a different country, madam?

Later in the show, when Mazıcı criticized the violent dispositions of some of the anti-coup demonstrators, the atmosphere in the studio got tense, and Saka angrily interfered once again:

Those people saved this country...Right now we're living through extraordinary times, and nobody has the patience to listen to this nonsense during this extraordinary period... This country does not want to listen to these words, when the martyrs' blood has not even dried yet.

Following this dispute, the show's moderator asked the history professor to alter her words:

The people claimed ownership of their democracy, they went out into the squares...And so many people lost their lives in this way...Nurşen Mazıcı would probably like to correct herself, she probably did not mean to say this... Nurşen Mazıcı, if you can make a correction on this subject before we go into the commercials, I'll be very glad.

When Mazıcı refused to realign the script of her performance with the Narrative of July 15, she was asked to leave the program during the commercial break.⁷

⁶ <http://tv.cnnturk.com/turkiyeningundemi>. Accessed 23 August 2016.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxTpHMLcJXA>. Accessed 14 October 2016.

Public figures who openly contradicted the Narrative of July 15 and questioned the government's course of action faced immediate consequences. In an interview published two days after the attempted putsch, Genco Erkal, a prominent theater actor and director, held government authorities responsible for the deaths of anti-coup demonstrators, criticized the use of the mosques in anti-coup mobilization, and said he feared the political consequences of the sustained mobilization of the masses after July 15 (Çıplak 2016). After this interview, the Education Ministry temporarily suspended Erkal's play under the pretext of security. Soon thereafter, an AKP-controlled county municipality removed the actor's name from a cultural center which had been named in his honor in 1994 (Diken 2016). In the meantime, the pro-government press vilified the veteran actor as a coup supporter (Yeni Şafak 2016).

Sıla, a popular singer, faced a similar reaction when she said that she would not participate in the Democracy and Martyrs Rally organized by the government as she "[did] not prefer to be part of such a show." Although the singer stressed her opposition to the coup in the same remarks, she was vilified by pro-government media. Consequently, the AKP-controlled municipalities of Istanbul, Bursa, and Kayseri cancelled her previously scheduled concerts in these cities (Cumhuriyet 2016e).

These incidents are telling signs of the limitations on democracy in present-day Turkey, as reflected in the conditions of social performance. From the perspective of cultural pragmatics, Jeffrey Alexander (2011, 87) conceptualizes democratic citizenship as "the legal capacity for skeptical viewership, the right to criticize and choose among performances, and the right to form one's own performances in response." In the post-July 15 political environment in Turkey, where the official narrative has been asserted with distinctive force and any challenges to it face immediate retribution, these performative capacities and rights associated with democratic citizenship have been significantly restricted.

The Mobilization of the Masses: "The Democracy Watch"

As already discussed, on the night of the coup attempt, Erdoğan called the people out to the streets to confront the tanks, posing a performative challenge for the putschists from which they could not recover. Although the coup had been decisively defeated by the morning of July 16, the government kept the public mobilized for the following three weeks.

In the early post-coup days, Erdoğan asked the citizens to gather in public squares on a nightly basis to keep a "Democracy Watch," arguing that the danger was not yet over. Text messages sent to the cell phones of nearly 68 million citizens on July 21 (Smith and Yuksekkaas 2016), signed "R.T. Erdoğan," read:

My Esteemed Nation: Do not give up the heroic resistance you have put up for your country, homeland, and flag. We will carry on with the resistance and the democracy watch to teach a lesson to the treacherous terrorists (FETÖ) who attempted to invade your country. The nation, and not the tanks, is the owner of the squares.⁸

On August 7, three weeks after the failed coup attempt, the Democracy Watch culminated in a massive "Democracy and Martyrs Rally" in Yenikapı attended by millions of citizens, making this the largest mass gathering in the history of the republic. Prior to the rally, 2.5 million Turkish flags were distributed to the attendants. Large contingents of politicians, celebrities, and business people attended the event, which was broadcast live on screens set

⁸ Author's own record.

up in public squares across the country. The president, the prime minister, the chief of the general staff, the president of religious affairs, and leaders of two of the three major opposition parties delivered speeches to the crowd (Hürriyet 2016d).⁹

During this phase of mass mobilization, the visual landscape of Turkish cities was saturated with political messages and imagery. Starting on the morning of July 16, large Turkish flags were displayed on major landmarks and public buildings. Soon thereafter, a coordinated publicity campaign placed the motto “Sovereignty Belongs to the Nation” against the background of the Turkish flag on billboards and digital screens across the country. This was followed in early August by professionally designed posters featuring the slogan, “We are the nation / We will not surrender Turkey to coups or terror.” Short videos featuring well-known actors, singers, business people, journalists, and leaders of faith communities, each concluding with this slogan, were broadcast on television and repeatedly played on advertising screens in public transportation vehicles.¹⁰

Strategies against Symbolic Pollution

The symbolically polluted status of the Gülen network as a criminal organization, a central motif of the Narrative of July 15, posed a serious problem for virtually all major government officials, including the president. The AKP under the leadership of Erdoğan had maintained a close alliance with the Gülen movement and collaborated with it at key political junctures over the last decade. Moreover, several former AKP MPs were well-known Gülenists, making the AKP governments as responsible as anyone for placing Gülenists in key positions in the state bureaucracy (Şık 2016). Thus, the president’s and his party’s status as the protagonists of July 15 was in danger of being spoiled through association with the polluted Gülenists.

The government found the solution in symbolic purification through public apology (Kampf and Löwenheim 2012) and in “splitting” time (Zerubavel 1991). To stem the increasingly vocal criticisms of his and his party’s extensive alliance with the Gülenists in the past, Erdoğan delivered a public apology on August 3, 2016, expressing his regret over his earlier gullibility about the network:

We also offered support to this structure in good faith. I’ll speak openly: Despite the fact that they had many aspects which I didn’t agree with, I personally helped them with the presumption that we could find common ground...Despite all our hesitations about the people and the staff who headed the structure, we indulged them for the sake of the extensive educational, charity, and solidarity activities they seemed to carry out domestically and abroad. We even indulged them because they said “Allah:” we said, we have something in common. But believe me, for a long time we didn’t and couldn’t see that this structure, which we saw as one of the different paths leading to the same destination, was a tool, a means, a cover for utterly different intentions, for insidious calculations... Despite everything, I regret that I did not uncover the true face of this treacherous organization much earlier. I know that we have an account to give both to our God and our nation. May my God and my nation both forgive us. (Cumhuriyet 2016d)

⁹ Notably, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish HDP, was excluded from the rally despite his unequivocal opposition to the coup attempt on the night of July 15.

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8t_ZRz3HUl. Accessed 30 January 2017.

Erdoğan thus confessed that he had supported the Gülen network, claimed that he had been unaware of its true nature, and asked for forgiveness for his credulousness, seeking to overcome his and his party's uncomfortable history with the movement through this ritual of purification.

Another symbolic strategy used by the government to the same end was to mark the corruption probes of December 2013 as a milestone. In the same speech where he asked for the forgiveness of the nation, Erdoğan claimed, "The coup attempt of 17/25 December we experienced in 2013 was a move where this treacherous organization for the first time showed its true face in all its nakedness." Since these probes were a conspiracy to overthrow the government, which clearly revealed the real nature of the movement, collaboration with the Gülenists was forgivable on grounds of ignorance before this date, and a deliberate crime after.

Prime Minister Yıldırım similarly marked relations with the Gülen movement after December 2013 as the litmus test for distinguishing the guilty from the gullible: "The measure for us is the aftermath of December 17/25. If someone has contributed to the economic, social, political activities of the organization knowingly and willingly, we have tools for identifying these. This is also the criterion in politics" (Yaşar 2016). Some journalists and public officials had warned the public at a much earlier point in time about the irregular practices of Gülenists within the judiciary and the police force, but AKP politicians had regularly shielded the movement from these accusations. The partitioning of time imposed by the government overrode these uncomfortable facts and exonerated Erdoğan and the AKP ministers—who waged an open war against it after December 2013—from any willful wrongdoing.

By thus claiming their innocence, apologizing for their incognizance, and marking the corruption probes of December 17/25 as a watershed which decisively separated the time before and after, government actors found symbolic solutions to the problem of prosecuting members and supporters of the Gülen movement without implicating themselves in the process. Once the government established this temporal distinction between innocent gullibility and criminal complicity, however, several actors facing prosecution for their close relations with the Gülen movement claimed that they, too, had been deceived. On July 22, Hacı Boydak, the former president of a large family conglomerate based in the Anatolian city of Kayseri, issued a press release claiming that his family had distanced itself from the Gülen network after this milestone:

After the December 17/25 process, which was a turning point for our country, we completely parted company with the FETÖ...Today, when we think about the donations and charities we as family members gave to the FETÖ in the past out of goodwill and sheer feelings of patriotism, we are deeply grieved like every other Turkish citizen. (Hürriyet 2016a)

Halit Dumankaya, the owner of a major construction company, similarly addressed the president in a full-page ad in major newspapers: "My esteemed President, Tayyip Recep Erdoğan. We, too, have been deceived...On December 17/25, we cut off all of our relations with this structure whose dirty faces are being revealed every passing day" (Hürriyet 2016c). Both statements concluded with expressions of gratitude to the people, the security forces, and the president who had together defeated the coup. However, neither businessman was able to avoid prosecution: Boydak was arrested—and Dumankaya remained in prison—for providing financial support to the FETÖ, while their companies and personal assets were seized by the government (Cumhuriyet 2016g).

The AKP government's efforts to acquit itself of any responsibility in the development of a parallel state structure while applying draconian measures to everyone else even tangentially associated with the Gülen movement, drew extensive criticism from opposition groups. In a rare challenge in the mainstream press to the government's arbitrary designation of the graft probes as a milestone, Umur Talu (2016) titled his column in *Habertürk*, "Why are you innocent alone?" Ahmet Şık, a journalist who had spent a year in prison in a case reportedly manufactured by the Gülenists, said during a court session in September 2016 that Erdoğan should be tried for aiding and abetting the criminal activities of the Gülen network. The presiding judge sought to prevent the entry of this statement into the court records (Cumhuriyet 2016f). Before the year's end, the long-standing critic of Gülen was arrested for spreading propaganda for several terrorist organizations including the FETÖ (Cumhuriyet 2016i).

The Memorialization of July 15

In the weeks following the coup attempt, government actors undertook a major campaign to permanently mark July 15 in national collective memory. Less than a week after the failed coup, Erdoğan declared July 15 a new national holiday, "The Day of Remembrance for the Martyrs" (Milliyet 2016). Five days later, the Bosphorus Bridge, where anti-coup demonstrators were brutally killed by the putschists, was renamed the "July 15 Martyrs Bridge" by a cabinet decree. Almost overnight, hundreds of traffic signboards in Istanbul were changed to register the new name of the bridge, one of the foremost symbols of the city and the daily point of transit for a large number of its residents. Around the same time, the Ankara municipality announced that Kızılay Meydanı, a central public square and transportation hub in the capital, would be renamed the "July 15 Kızılay Democracy Square." Erdoğan declared that monuments dedicated to the martyrs of July 15 would be built in these two cities (Hürriyet 2016b). Through these acts of memorialization, "July 15" became part of official national history, comparable in significance to central reference points from the founding era of the republic (Özyürek 2016).

The teaching of this new official history to citizens-in-formation began almost immediately. With a decision of the Ministry of National Education, the first week of the new school year in all primary and secondary schools was dedicated to activities commemorating July 15. A booklet titled *In the Memory of the Victory of Democracy on July 15 and Our Martyrs*, distributed to students on the first day of the semester (Bianet 2016b), contained a foreword written by Erdoğan, photos and epic descriptions of the people's struggle against the coup, a timeline of the events of July 15/16, pictures of public buildings devastated by putschist bombing, headshots of "martyrs of July 15," and photos from the Democracy Watch rallies (T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı 2016).

In addition, the ministry made available visual material about July 15 for use in the classroom, including two professionally produced videos. In the first of these, Erdoğan's voice is heard reading all ten stanzas of the national anthem against news footage of the coup attempt and the Democracy and Martyrs Rally. The second video inserts July 15 into a series of heroic acts by the Turkish nation, constructing a historical thread running from the Dardanelles Campaign in World War I and the Battle of Dumlupınar in the Turkish War of Independence to the defeat of the coup on July 15.¹¹ The comprehensive curriculum reform proposed by the Ministry of National Education in January 2017 incorporated July 15 into

¹¹ <http://www.eba.gov.tr/15temmuzanmaprogrami>. Accessed 1 October 2016.

course syllabi and textbooks at all levels of primary and secondary school education (Cumhuriyet 2017).

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, the government invested a significant amount of political will and material resources to inscribe July 15 in national memory and official history. Far-reaching steps such as the renaming of major public landmarks, the introduction of a new national holiday, and the incorporation of July 15 into school curricula are designed not only to prevent this event from receding into the background, but also to ensure that its remembrance will be dictated by the officially sanctioned Narrative of July 15.

Beyond these cultural transformations in collective memory and official history, the government's construction of the event also paved the way for significant political and economic changes. The Narrative of July 15, with its emphasis on an enemy that had infiltrated all state institutions, was used to justify the appropriation of extraordinary powers by the president and the cabinet. Initially declared for a three-month period and renewed twice afterwards, the state of emergency allowed the government to rule by decrees, restricted judicial review, absolved public authorities of legal responsibility, and severely restricted the rights of detained and arrested persons (Cumhuriyet 2016b).

What followed was the greatest purge in the history of the Turkish Republic: By mid-February 2017, approximately 125,000 military officers, civil servants, judges, prosecutors, police officers, teachers, and academics had been removed or suspended, and 40,000 had been arrested (Reuters 2017). Dozens of schools, private dormitories, medical institutions, foundations, trade unions, civil society organizations, and media outlets, and fifteen universities were summarily shut down, leaving their personnel unemployed overnight (Tartanoğlu 2016).

While justified with reference to the attempted coup of July 15, the purges also targeted many Kurdish, Kemalist, leftist, and liberal actors and organizations that did not have any affiliation with the Gülen network (Yeginsu 2016). In an environment characterized by the suspension of legal rights, courts under government influence ordered the arrest of MPs and mayors from the pro-Kurdish HDP (the Peoples' Democratic Party), including the co-leaders of the party (Nordland 2016). Within the first six months of the state of emergency, nearly 100 journalists were jailed without trial and 775 press cards were rescinded (RSF 2017). Finally, with a referendum scheduled for April 2017, the government paved the way for a regime change that would replace Turkey's parliamentary democracy with an authoritarian presidential system (Sezgin 2017).

The coup attempt, as constructed through the government narrative, also resulted in a substantial transfer of wealth. A government decree issued a week after the failed putsch closed 196 business associations on grounds of their ties to the Gülen network (Tabak 2016). By November 2016, the government had seized nearly 500 companies with an estimated total value of \$8 billion on account of the financial support they allegedly gave to the FETÖ (Cumhuriyet 2016h). When these companies are put up for sale, the once extensive network of companies affiliated with the Gülen movement is likely to be appropriated by another group within the Muslim business class with close ties to Erdoğan and to the AKP.¹²

¹² On these two groups within the Muslim conservative business class in Turkey, see Buğra and Savaşkan 2014, 259–262.

Conclusion

This article has argued that social performances played a key role in determining the immediate outcome as well as the cultural, social, and political consequences of Turkey's attempted coup of July 15.

In more general terms, it has sought to contribute to the social science literatures on events and social performances by relating them to each other in novel ways. With reference to the cultural and comparative-historical sociology of events, the study has proposed a two-step analysis of the cultural construction of political events. The first stage concerns the contingent unfolding of the event itself, narrowly defined. As already argued in detail, the emergent interpretation of the event in this stage is a significant factor contributing to its outcome. The second stage involves the retrospective construction of the event. This more fully fleshed-out narrative framework justifies, and sometimes even makes necessary, certain institutional transformations, while rendering alternative courses of action and modes of discourse inappropriate, obsolete, or inconceivable. Thus, the dominant narrative of the event helps determine its cultural, social, and political consequences. This two-step model suggests that the contingent and transformative aspects of historical events can only be understood by focusing on cultural processes of signification.

While most cultural and comparative-historical sociologists agree that events are culturally constructed, the mechanisms of construction often remain undertheorized. The present study suggests that cultural pragmatics provides useful analytical tools for tracing the course and explaining the outcome of this construction process. Political events are constructed in a complex performative field, where antagonistic actors vie for symbolic dominance through their performances and counterperformances. The effective projection of legitimacy and power in these performances is contingent upon many factors, including access to the means of symbolic production, compelling scripts that effectively draw upon “the deep background of collective representations,” a working *mise-en-scène* which makes these scripts “walk and talk” through time and space, and skillful actors who seem authentic to the relevant audiences (Alexander 2004b, 529–533). In other words, the contingency of events partly stems from the contingency of the social performances that seek to establish their authoritative interpretations.

Finally, the article raises the question of how the democratic public sphere might be conceptualized from the perspective of cultural pragmatics, given the latter's basic assumption that legitimacy and power are performatively derived. As Alexander (2010, 2011) and others have underlined, economic and political resources do not guarantee performative success, and “moral performances” (Eyerman 2006) might allow the socially or politically dispossessed to effectively challenge powerful actors and organizations. At the same time, however, those who control such resources enjoy distinctive advantages in the performative field, as they have privileged access to the means of symbolic production and might use their means to recruit or co-opt skilled scriptwriters, stage directors, and actors. This conversion of economic and political capital into performative power occurs to some extent in all settings, almost always resulting in uneven performative fields. When powerful social and political actors use their resources to monopolize the public stage and systematically exclude all critical performances, however, they destroy the basic conditions for a democratic public sphere, as has been the case in post-July 15 Turkey.

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