

Placing STS *in and through* Turkey

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Abstract

Why and how does it matter to undertake an STS praxis in a country where the field lacks adequate institutional recognition and capacity? This article investigates this question by tracing multiple, fragmented and contingent stories of placing STS in and through Turkey. At first sight, discontinuous stories of STS programs established in universities and unrecognized nature of STS as a discipline by the Council of Higher Education draw attention to the “underdeveloped” nature of the field in this country. This article counters such a perspective by rendering visible the works that support STS ethos as well as loose institutions within which STS is expected to flourish. By following people and artifacts in institutional and more-than-institutional places of STS, this article acknowledges the efforts both to translate STS into the particular places of Turkey and to use STS as an intellectual space through which technoscientific knowledge can be questioned and translated into the local contexts of the country. The analysis of these translation efforts reveals that STS can be thought of as a space that enables one to be attuned to the sensibilities and realities of the country and search for ways to democratize the processes of technoscientific knowledge production whether it be in the universities or in public spaces.

Keywords

institutionalizing STS; more-than-institutional places of STS; translation; knowledge production; Turkey

Introduction

Toplumsallığı oluşturan ilişki şebekelerinin “asli” ünitesi, global seyyariyet de değildir, somut yerler de – mesele, toplumsallığın kapitalizmin soyut döngüsünün yersiz–yurtsuz genelliği ile yerlerin somutluğu arasındaki özgül bağlantılar üzerinden anlaşılabilir/kurgulanabilecek olmasıdır. O halde, yine de yere–yöreye, ‘memleket’e duyarlı olmak lazım. (Tanıl Bora [1998] 2008, 251)

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The “main” unit of the relationship networks that form sociality is neither global mobility nor physical places. The issue is that sociality can be understood/constructed through specific relations between the nomadic generality of the abstract cycle of capitalism and the concreteness of places. Therefore, we need to still be sensitive to place-locality, to *memleket*. (Ibid. Translation provided by Alkan, Kaşdoğan, and Erol. “*Memleket*” refers to the country but also carries a sense of belonging to a place of origin.)

Why and how does it matter to undertake an STS praxis in a country where the field lacks adequate institutional recognition and capacity? This question emerged out of the exhibition “An Archaeology of STS in Turkey” (Kaşdoğan, Yetişkin, and Erol 2018) that focused on the institutional and intellectual stories of STS in Turkey, launched during the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) annual meeting in 2018. It, later on, constituted the motive to curate the “Innovating STS in Turkey” exhibit (Kaşdoğan and Alkan 2019) in line with the conference theme in the following year’s 4S annual meeting. The notion of “innovation” motivated us to approach the limits of institutionalizing STS in Turkey not in terms of lack but as a push to think of/practice STS in creative ways. We attended the potential generative role of gaps and problems in institutionalizing STS in the country, and directed our attention to more-than-institutional places of STS that we identify as supporting an STS ethos in Turkey, whether in the shape of a public event, a newspaper column, a journal, or a documentary. We took these experimental performances as ways of reflecting on and learning new things about doing STS in Turkey. This article draws on the methodology we adopted while designing these exhibitions: identifying institutional and more-than-institutional places of STS by following people and artifacts related to these places as well as drawing on our daily encounters through which we were able to acknowledge the existence of STS ethos in the places that are not identified as STS places.

This effort speaks to the will to engage in reflexive knowledge production, a process that is sensitive to the place, or *memleket* problems (as introduced in Bora’s opening quote). Herein, we neither ignore nor underestimate the Euro-American roots of STS scholarship; but rather, we would like to bring to fore—the ways of finding new soils that STS can take different roots *in* and *through* Turkey.

In the first part of this essay, we discuss institutionalization of STS in Turkey.¹ STS programs and courses are not widespread in this country given that STS has yet to be acknowledged as a discipline or as a field of associate professorship by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK).² YÖK was founded in 1981, right after the 1980 military coup, as an institution to oversee and discipline all higher education in Turkey. The cumbersome bureaucracy of YÖK, together with the political pressures directly introduced by the government, give little space to scholars who want to create a change in such a centralized system, including the opening of STS programs. Nevertheless, there have been many initiatives to translate STS into the academic environment in Turkey, coinciding with the emerging self-reflexivity of the 1990s in Turkish academia.³ As we will discuss in the first part, these initiatives have mostly depended on the efforts of

¹ We approach institutionalization of STS not simply about the existence of STS programs in universities but rather with a larger question about universities as autonomous institutions for critical knowledge production.

² Associate professorship is a degree conferred by YÖK in Turkey, after a comprehensive examination of a scholar’s publications and other academic accomplishments. This exam is akin to a tenure evaluation in the US system.

³ In the 1990s when concerns about the state of social sciences mounted, social scientists in Turkey also began to engage in reflective discussions on knowledge production processes in conversation with the Report of the

individual scholars maneuvering against the barriers posed by the Turkish education bureaucracy. We conceptualized these efforts as acts of translating already existing knowledges into the particular institutional places of Turkey. Translation as an analytic helped us both to emphasize the context-dependent characteristics of knowledge and elaborate on knowledge transfer as a process of meaning creation.

The ongoing limits of placing STS in universities seem to push for innovating rather loose structures through which STS can be translated in different ways. Among them, we would like to mention STS Turkey (2023), a scholarly network founded to connect researchers with interests in the study of science, technology, and medicine; *iris* (2023), a crowd-sourced STS encyclopedia in Turkish; and *IstanbuLab* (2023), a collaborative and transdisciplinary research platform for academics, activists, and artists engaged in the social studies of science and technology within the Turkish context and beyond. In the second section, as the founding members of *IstanbuLab*, we turn to our effort to open hybrid knowledge places for STS on the basis of *IstanbuLab*'s *STS Muhabbetleri* event series. This discussion also adds another layer to previous discussions by questioning the relationship between local and transnational, unpacking what it means to do STS *through* Turkey. It also highlights the importance of translation in its multiplicity: translation between art and science, between disciplines, and between academia and public space.

The last section stands as an exercise for us, as scholars assuming the role of a translator. Building on the idea of knowledge transfer as a process of meaning creation, we discuss a number of works that are not presented as works of STS but can be considered as works that support STS, with sensibilities, interests, and responsibilities that speak to the STS ethos. These works can be clustered as standing at *epistemic faultlines*, a term coined by Sharon Traweek (2021) describing "where conceptual ruptures appear both routinely and unexpectedly." This shift in attention from institutional and loosely structured STS places to already existing works not labeled as STS is not an arbitrary choice. It is part of our endeavor to search for ways to practice STS in a country where STS has yet to be (officially) recognized as a field of study, also remaining marginal and invisible in academic environments.

While introducing the more-than-institutional places of STS, our intention is not to search for alternatives to the efforts of institutionalization within universities. It is obvious that the institutional landscape of STS in Turkey does not correspond to the present increasing interests in STS, causing hardships for STS researchers in finding academic positions, and research funds. Nevertheless, our concern is more about the political dominance in the higher education system, especially the recent acts of curtailing the autonomy and freedom of universities. So, our contention is that where rupturing political faultlines cuts the ground out from under the scholars in Turkey, we need to both defend the university as a knowledge-production place and be in search for alternative places/spaces of knowledge.

Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of Social Sciences. These discussions were reflected in a symposium book *Sosyal Bilimleri Yeniden Düşünmek: Yeni Bir Kavrayışa Doğru* [Rethinking Social Sciences: Towards a New Understanding], which includes the piece by Tanıl Bora critically reflecting on the practice of social sciences in Turkey through the lens of publishing ([1998] 2008).

Rethinking Institutionalization of STS in Turkey

Institutionalizing STS in Turkey's higher education system has been a fragmented and contingent process. In 1995, for the first time, a course titled "Science, Technology, and Society" was offered as a compulsory course of the engineering curricula at Bilkent University. In 1997, "Science and Technology Policy Studies Program" (TEKPOL) was founded under the Graduate School of Social Sciences at the Middle East Technical University (METU). The first STS graduate program in Turkey found home at the Istanbul Technical University (ITU) in 2000. In 2013, another non-thesis graduate program, "Science and Society," was opened at Ankara University under the Institute of Social Sciences. In addition to these programs, there are STS(-related) courses distributed in different programs and departments at different universities.

Investigating the openings of STS(-related) courses and programs since the 1990s in Turkey, shows that institutionalizing STS has depended on various local, national, and international conditions. Our analysis of these conditions reveals that the relationship between local/national needs and international practices/encounters got saturated within the processes of translating STS into the Turkish context: scholars' identification of local needs urged them to translate the existing Western STS programs and courses in a way to answer those very needs in their home institutions. In this part of the article, by using translation as an analytic, we will discuss institutionalization of STS in Turkey with a focus on the following cases: (1) Science and Technology Policy Studies Program at METU; (2) MA Program in Science, Technology, and Society at ITU; and (3) "Science, Technology, and Society" course at Bilkent. Through these cases, we aim to unpack what scholars supposed STS would fulfill in the country as well as why and how they strived for integrating STS into the cumbersome bureaucracy of Turkey's higher education.

We approach translation as a nondeterministic act of meaning and value creation that accounts for the differences across different spatial contexts and for the need of conversions when transferring knowledge from one context to another ([Türem and Ballestero 2014](#)). The use of translation as an analytic resists binaries such as center/periphery, developed/developing, and global/local, and allows more hermeneutic complexity ([Savcı 2021](#)). This elaboration is in consonance with the STS discussions that have been attentive to the spatial context, location, site, and/or geographies of science and knowledge transfer (e.g., [Shapin 1998](#); [Secord 2004](#); [Naylor 2005](#); [Powell 2007](#); [Henke and Gieryn 2008](#)). These discussions have already taught us that "'place' continues to matter a great deal for the practices and accomplishments of science" ([ibid., 2008, 353](#)). Alongside STS scholars who have drawn our attention to material-semiotic networks and hybridization between different knowledges and practices (e.g., [Callon 1986](#); [Latour 1987](#); [Law and Mol 2001](#)), we have also learned that knowledge transfer is not a uni-directional process. Extending on these insights, we propose that while the production of STS places in university settings in Turkey was a translation work, these places of STS also made possible the translation of technoscientific knowledges into Turkey's context.

Given that the initiatives to introduce STS in Turkey's universities have remained dependent on the efforts and decisions of certain individual scholars, the method of following scholars' stories appears both as a necessity and an opportunity to understand the production of STS places in Turkey. While the story of METU-TEKPOL is based on letters written in the 1990s during its establishment process, narratives about STS places at ITU and Bilkent are centered on the interviews we conducted with scholars who made these STS places possible.

The Department of Science and Technology Policy Studies at METU launched the first post-graduate education program in Science and Technology Policy Studies in 1997 in Ankara. To strengthen the research capabilities of the program and achieve coordination between education and research, the Research Center for Science and Technology Policies was founded in 1998 under the President's Office; research and education are interlinked under TEKPOL.⁴ The establishment of TEKPOL in the capital city Ankara was not an arbitrary incident: the strong connections between academics at METU and State Planning Organization (DPT) facilitated its launch following the establishment of Science and Technology Policy Department⁵ at the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) in 1993 ([Ansal, Ekinici, and Kaşdoğan 2018, 29](#)).

During the preparation of "Archaeology of STS in Turkey" exhibit, faculty members at TEKPOL generously shared an archive with IstanbulLab, including multiple documents showing the reason behind selecting METU as a place to institutionalize science and technology policies in Turkey. In a report, Ergun Türkcan ([\[1995\] 2018](#)), one of the pioneering researchers in science and technology policies in Turkey, writes:

It would be hard to establish a research-education center that necessitates a multidisciplinary academic environment in a public institution such as TÜBİTAK though it is an independent organization in legal terms. A university, preferably one that undertakes research and educational activities in English, is a natural place for such a center. METU was agreed on by taking into account the university's relations with, and closeness to TÜBİTAK as well as its previous collaborations. . . "Science Policy Research Unit" (SPRU) at Sussex University, which is the most developed and successful institution in the world, is taken as a model. ([Ibid.](#), with translation provided by Alkan, Kaşdoğan, and Erol)

In addition to similar justification notes that highlight existing models in the West, we also see that the need for TEKPOL got legitimized on the basis of multiple global and national developments at that time, including the establishment of World Trade Organization in 1995 and its potential effect on technology transfer processes as well as the transition to knowledge society, and the emphasis on technology-based economic development in Turkey's "Seventh Five-Year Development Plan (1996–2000)" ([Kaşdoğan 2018a](#)).

One of the most influential scholars in the process of establishing TEKPOL was Hasan Ünal Nalbantoğlu, a professor of sociology at METU who wrote a letter to the METU Rectorate and the President of TÜBİTAK to justify the need for a new research center in the area of science and technology policies ([Nalbantoğlu \[1995\] 2018](#)).⁶ This letter helps us understand "translation" in a two-dimensional way: the translation of an institutional infrastructure and the necessity of that infrastructure to translate technoscientific knowledge as being sensitive to the Turkish context.

Nalbantoğlu was critical of both global marketization of academia and national actors' embracement of this process without taking "the sociological realities" of Turkey into consideration:

⁴ For a detailed information, please see the website of the program ([METU 2021](#)).

⁵ Currently, renamed: Science, Technology, and Innovation Policies Department.

⁶ This original letter was also published in Nalbantoğlu's book entitled *Arayışlar* ([2009](#)). When we quote him in the following pages, we will be referring to this publication.

If we do not want to remain like a leaf flitting in the innovation winds that always blow from other countries and are often driven by markets, we need to embrace a long-term vision as a foundation for the country's future science and technology policies. This claim is the same as saying that developments in other societies should be constantly monitored, but that it is time for us to move beyond being an ordinary and dependent consumer of every scientific idea or every technological product produced elsewhere. . . . Our country has the sufficient qualified workforce that can develop ground plans in accordance with the vision based on such a premise, and contribute to the formulation of concrete science and technology policies based on these ground plans. (Nalbantoğlu 2009, 404–5. Translation provided by Alkan, Kaşdoğan, and Erol)

As this quotation implies, Nalbantoğlu saw the new center both as a *cordon sanitaire*⁷ that would restrict tendencies to aimlessly follow the tide and as a place capable of going against the tide, if not creating its own tide. This twofold goal for the center is reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre's space/place dialectics. As it is interpreted by Merrifield (1993), "place comprises the locus and a sort of stopping of these flows [of capital, money, commodities, and information], a specific moment in the dynamics of space-relations under capitalism" (ibid., 26). From this neo-Marxist perspective, space is defined as the domain of hegemonic forces (creating the tidal force to use Nalbantoğlu's analogy) that dominates life by means of spatial practices like commodification. Since these spatial practices eventually create their own concrete spaces, i.e., places, the struggle against these forces has to start in a "place platform" in which daily practices are embedded (ibid.). According to Nalbantoğlu, METU was the right choice for building such a place of struggle because of both its required accumulated knowledge and its relatively autonomous character. In his emphasis on autonomy, Nalbantoğlu also stood against the interventionist nation-state policies in addition to market mechanisms, and advocated for the importance of rowing against both tides.

Nalbantoğlu's emphasis on academic autonomy endures to be an important problem space, and has become even more of a pressing public issue with the recent damages to public universities, exemplified in the Boğaziçi University resistance: following the appointment of a politically controversial rector from outside the university by the President of Turkey in January 2021, in complete disregard of the university's traditions and idea of autonomy, university community started a remarkable feat of resistance that continues to this day. This is a current example of how the politico-bureaucratic structures in Turkey strangle the kind of university advocated by Nalbantoğlu. While Boğaziçi resistance teaches us why and how it matters to defend universities, our protagonists are also the ones who defended these places as those to be transformed in accordance with local necessities and sensibilities.

Our second case is the first MA Program in "Science, Technology, and Society" in Turkey founded by Hacer Ansal, and her colleagues Yıldız Sey and Gülsün Sağlamer under the Institute of Social Sciences at ITU in 2000 (Yetişkin 2018a). This program was jointly administered with the European Inter-University Association on Society, Science, and Technology (ESST) Master of Arts Program.⁸ Despite its success in institutionalizing STS in Turkey, this program was ultimately closed in 2006 following the departure of several faculty members alongside financial difficulties (Yetişkin 2018b). In 2016, the program was re-

⁷ Nalbantoğlu uses the phrase "cordon sanitaire" in his own letter. It is a French phrase that means sanitary cordon—a barrier protecting an area from outside influences.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on the content of this program, see: Yetişkin 2018c.

launched under a different structure with the initiatives of Mehmet Karaca (prior president of the university) and Aydan Turanlı (director & program coordinator), and it currently stands as the only STS program conferring an MA degree with a thesis requirement ([Kaşdoğan 2018b](#)).

As Ansal tells in her interview with Kaşdoğan ([2017](#)), her initial encounter with STS was motivated by her concern, as an engineer, about the impacts of technological developments. After quitting her engineering job, she enrolled in the PhD program at the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex. Upon her return to Turkey, she started working at ITU as a faculty member, where she was offered to launch an STS program. Before establishing this MA program at ITU, she and her colleagues examined the existing STS programs and courses in Europe and North America, and conducted visits to some universities to discuss their program with established STS scholars ([Ansal 2019](#)):

We hit the road in early September, 1998. Our first stop was Boston. At Harvard University, we had the opportunity to meet with Prof. Nur Yalman and STS scholars, including Sheila Jasanoff. . . . At MIT, we discussed our program with 4–5 professors and got their opinions. . . . Our next stop in the US was Cornell University. . . . We continued on our way to Edinburgh University. . . . After Edinburgh, we came to our last stop, Maastricht University. We held meetings with the faculty in the STS program, including Wiebe Bijker and Jessica Mesman. . . . Wiebe Bijker said he found our program very well prepared, but it would be better for us to join them, the ESST, which has been in operation since 1991. . . . It was very attractive for us to be included in such a network of education / universities in Europe. (Translation provided by Alkan, Kaşdoğan, Erol.)

The ESST program attracted Ansal and her colleagues also because of the flexibility it offered. Although the content of the compulsory courses had to be the same for all countries, individual universities had the opportunity to be flexible in the second year of the program with different areas of specialization. This opened a window to translate the STS-related concerns into those eminent in Turkey. In line with the framings of Turkey as a developing country and accompanying emphasis on science and technology-driven development in the country, the focus of the second year program was on processes of technoscientific development, its problems, and the ways of developing capabilities to move forward development.⁹ In this sense, Ansal and her colleagues became both the translator of an international program into the higher education system in Turkey, and the creator of a place that contributed to the translation of technoscientific developments by training students with STS perspectives, making them delve into complex relations between science, technology, and society.

The consideration of technoscientific differences across countries and thereby the acknowledgment of the need for translation was also prominent in the initiation of the first introductory STS course at Bilkent University. Haldun Özaktaş, an electrical engineering professor, is the translator of our third case, who managed to integrate STS into the core curriculum of the engineering faculty. In Özaktaş's story, we see that the institutional changes to the Turkish engineering education were undertaken to make it compatible with the US standards, and this provided an opportunity for STS advocates/scholars to find places where STS can be grounded, or at least practiced.

⁹ For more detailed information, see second semester specialization courses.

In the mid-1990s, eminent universities in Turkey started to transform their engineering faculties to fulfill the criteria of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) (Özaktaş 2013). One of the requirements of the ABET accreditation was the integration of an ethics course into engineering education. Bilkent was among the first universities pursuing ABET accreditation, thereby, revising its engineering curricula. Özaktaş influenced turning, the conventional engineering ethics course into an introductory STS course.¹⁰ Özaktaş's motivation behind insisting on the latter lies in his understanding of ethics, as he notes in an interview with Alkan:

As taught in engineering ethics courses, ethics means the application of philosophical approaches to the cases, and it has a narrow framework that only focuses on individuals' process of making ethical decisions. We call this approach micro ethics... There are no strong reasons to focus on the micro-ethics perspective in Turkey. . . [Therefore, the adoption of this perspective] is related to the lack of a broader perspective rather than being a conscious choice. In Anglosaxon countries, there are deeper reasons behind the prevalence of micro-perspective, which are, I think, about the individual and puritan moral sentiment. (2019a, with translation by Alkan, Kaşdoğan, and Erol)

As the above quote reveals, the translation of the course content was the effort to translate the obligatory ethics course in accordance with cultural differences. Yet, such a translation was not a smooth process. As Özaktaş explained—thinking about science, technology, and society in relational terms was difficult for engineering students because they had little knowledge on social sciences and did not want to improve that forms of knowledge in their university lives (*ibid.*). To overcome students' reluctance to take non-technical courses, Özaktaş modified the course content: he assigned newspaper articles, providing students the opportunity to learn STS through daily, familiar affairs.

These stories teach us important lessons about how STS can flourish in a setting where it lacks sufficient required institutional grounding as well as why institutionalization appears as a necessity. Higher education system in Turkey has already been mainly built on and developed according to Western structures. We recognize that this creates problems, for example, in terms of language barriers and other cultural differences; and might lead to disengagement from the national/local context. Although we recognize that our protagonists had been embedded in this Western-dominated academic system and mostly learned from their Western counterparts, we value their practices of institutionalizing STS in Turkey as the efforts of making university *a better place*, an autonomous place in which knowledge production is undertaken in a context-sensitive manner.

The current attacks on the means of knowledge production, the overthrowing of institutions makes this requirement and the need to defend the university even more meaningful. We believe that discussions over institutionalizing STS in Turkey's university settings is not simply about search for enduring places for STS practices but also opening windows to think thoroughly about larger questions such as university autonomy and democratic knowledge production processes. The lack of required institutional support for STS programs and/or fragmented and contingent institutional stories of STS in Turkey is further telling multiple things about the past and present pressures on critical knowledge production processes as well as complex scientific cultures in this country, which surely goes beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless,

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of how Özaktaş opened and taught the course, see Özaktaş (2013), and Alkan (2019b).

the recent academic environment in Turkey has also pushed scholars to create places outside university settings in order to continue producing critical knowledge. We value such places as they help us explore how to make meaningful STS in Turkey.

Curating Hybrid Knowledge Spaces

In 2018, *IstanbuLab* launched *STS Muhabbetleri* public event series at the art center Akbank Sanat (Beyoğlu, İstanbul)—as an experimental space of encounter—to collectively learn about the ways to democratize technoscientific processes in Turkey.¹¹ The Turkish word *muhabbet* comes from the Arabic word with meanings of love and friendship, and the verb form, *muhabbet etmek*, means to have a friendly conversation. As *muhabbet* connotes, this series aimed to stimulate conversations through establishing friendly relationships on the basis of related intellectual interests and political concerns between scholars (located in and outside Turkey coming from different disciplinary backgrounds), as well as between scholars, activists, artists, and the general public interested in the issues under discussion.

STS Muhabbetleri can be approached as a “hybrid knowledge space” (Law 2016), as an experiment to search for ways of doing STS in Turkey outside university settings. In “STS as Method,” John Law (*ibid.*) underlines the relative easiness of operating in conventional academic knowledge spaces, and questions the possibilities of making a career within STS, for example, by working in the space between art and science. While celebrating the experimental capacity of hybrid or unconventional spaces, especially within post-colonial contexts, he acknowledges that creating such spaces are “tough,” “slow,” and “hazardous” (*ibid.*) The case of *STS Muhabbetleri* adds on to this insight by presenting the constitution of an unconventional knowledge space out of a necessity, not directly with an experimental spirit. Given the difficulties of holding meaningful STS discussions in a university setting, we, as *IstanbuLab*, directed our search toward alternative spaces and an art center came to be interested in our efforts. It was surely not an easy journey as we had to learn new ways of doing multiple translation work, e.g., between art and science, between disciplines, and between academia and public space. This speaks well to Law’s emphasis that goes beyond simply celebrating alternatives. However, Law’s discussion does not necessarily direct attention to the conditions of/motivations behind the emergence of such hybrid spaces. In this section, we aim to introduce main lessons we learned through curating a hybrid knowledge space, and how these inform STS praxis in Turkey.

The series opened alongside Dutch media theorist Geert Lovink, in conversation with *IstanbuLab* member Ebru Yetişkin, and with the participation of the general audience (Akbank Sanat 2018). An online dialogue continued between Lovink and Yetişkin, and it was published in *IstanbuLab* blog (Yetişkin and Lovink 2018). Extending the *muhabbet* beyond the spatiotemporality of this event was helpful not only to deepen the discussion held but also to communicate motivations behind the curation of particular events. In this interview, Yetişkin summarized well, the main motive behind *STS Muhabbetleri* as “building a collective curatorial research paratactically.” This call gave orientation to the event series, through which we questioned how to practice STS simultaneously at “local/national” and “transnational” scales by inviting internationally established STS scholars to the *muhabbet*: namely, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Wiebe Bijker, and

¹¹ This event series was curated by Duygu Kaşdoğan and Ebru Yetişkin, and made possible through a collective effort of *IstanbuLab* members. To access events organized in this series, see: [Kaşdoğan and Yetişkin n.d.](#)

Ulrike Felt. In this sense, different meanings of the prefix “trans-” provided an exercise to move in between and beyond both the national and disciplinary boundaries.

For the muhabbet with Sunder Rajan, we asked law and society scholar Umut Türem from Boğaziçi University to moderate this event given the very scope of Sunder Rajan’s talk on judicialized health ([Akbank Sanat 2019](#)). As Türem notes:

Moderating an STS talk was a very positive experience for me. It was full of new insights, thought provoking, and quite enjoyable overall. . . [T]he talk overlapped with my broad intellectual interests: I have for long deemed another interdisciplinary “field,” that of “Law and Society” or “Socio-Legal Studies,” my intellectual home. . . The talk being as much a Socio Legal Studies talk as it was an STS lecture thus made it truly rewarding for me. . . “Justice” appeared to be the guiding theme in charting these otherwise vast territories of knowledge. ([Kaşdoğan and Türem 2019, 1-2](#))

One way to facilitate conversations at local and transnational scale is bringing scholars located in different parts of the world together around shared intellectual interests. The conversation emerging in such a space of encounter is telling about learning both the topic under discussion from different perspectives and how to reconstitute new ways of thinking. This event helped us rethink the well-known STS concept of “boundary objects” ([Star and Griesemer, 1989](#)) alongside Türem’s emphasis on the emergence of “justice” as the guiding theme. Hence, we reconstituted our ways of thinking about boundary objects beyond the definition of Star and Griesemer, which suggests that “the creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds” ([ibid., 393](#)). Instead of the consensus-based understanding of boundary objects, we attended to the emergence of a boundary object out of a dissensus-based dialogue in an “odd mix” that Türem refers to:

The novelty was in the broader frame the talk was part of however: a straight academic talk by a well-established scholar, organized by “a group of volunteers,” animated by an insistent focus on “justice,” taking place in an “art venue” and “open to the public.” This to me seemed like an odd mix, but odd as it might be, it was a highly successful blend of social science, political intervention, and art. I was greatly impressed and inspired by this chemistry. It presented a fresh alternative to the two poles of academic/scholarly work: academic production in the ivory tower, or scholarly writing animated by a desire for immediate intervention into the day-to-day politics. This event was neither. It was academic yet did not exclude the people on the street; it was deeply political yet did not slide into the pull of everyday politics. ([Kaşdoğan and Türem 2019, 2-3](#))

While designing each event, we had a sure intention to put particular STS concepts/approaches into circulation alongside contemporary issues—to see whether/how these concepts/approaches are embraced by local scholars and passersby situated “outside” STS “in” Turkey. For example, in the muhabbet with Ulrike Felt, we put the notion of “sociotechnical imaginaries” at the center of the muhabbet, which turned into “technopolitical imaginaries” during the dialogue. This shift in the emphasis from “social” to “political” led us to ask whether this is telling about technological imaginaries overdetermined by top-down policies and practices. We wondered how this shift might be teaching about the public engagement with technoscientific processes in Turkey. This curiosity has been significant for it gave signposts to the subjects that ask for systematic research, such as social understandings of technology development in Turkey. In

short, while curating this event series as a praxis to reconstitute our own ways of thinking about STS approaches/concepts mainly developed in Western academia, we had been also locating issues that have yet to be subject to systematic research processes.

These events did not always unfold in a form to rethink established STS concepts/theories. The invited scholars have also helped us leverage basic STS insights in Turkey. For example, the talk by Wiebe Bijker on the democratization of technological culture also worked as an “Introduction to STS” class. These talks had been important for us especially at the moments when we started to feel so immersed within the local context, within its everyday politics. These scholars’ visit to Turkey was also meaningful in our journey of locating IstanbulLab in a transnational landscape of STS, in providing us with a look at IstanbulLab from the outside, as a chance to re-reflect on our own practices.

STS Muhabbetleri that we held with scholars located in Turkey opened another space for us to question how to communicate and leverage the importance of STS both for scientific practices, and democratization of technoscientific cultures in Turkey. The muhabbet with Reşit Canbeyli has been remarkable in this regard as it troubled our role as translators. In this event, we aimed to discuss “laboratory studies” on the basis of his book—*Bir Laboratuvar: YÖK’ün Gölgesinde, Bilim Tarihi Işığında* [*A Laboratory: In the Shade of YÖK, In the Light of History of Science*]*—*that introduces his story of building a laboratory in the Department of Psychology at Boğaziçi University (2016). However, we could not unpack the importance of laboratory studies as an STS method during the event where the focus came to rest on science/research cultures in Turkish universities. Through this event, we realized our taken-for-granted approach to laboratory studies as one of the main methodological approaches of STS, and the event pushed us to rethink the aim/scope of laboratory studies in the context of Turkey: how can laboratory studies that critically unpack scientific knowledge production processes add to the context in which we need to defend for “science” in the face of ongoing attacks against universities and disgracing of scientists critical about oppressive and authoritarian rule, especially under the bureaucratic steering of YÖK?

Similar questions still make their way into our collective discussions over the ways to do STS in Turkey. Therefore, *STS Muhabbetleri* has taught us not only the importance of the space of encounter in translating STS across boundaries and attending to what gets reconstituted in such a space, but also the need to further engage with already existing works not necessarily situated in the literature of STS. In the last part of this article, we will unpack why and how it matters to engage more with works that remain outside STS literature, and bring these into the attention space of STS scholars to do meaningful STS in Turkey.

Weaving Particular Works into STS

The translation with *STS Muhabbetleri* mainly attempted to show how STS has (and may have) been translated in Turkey. As another act of translation, we showcase next some exemplary works that are not necessarily thought of as STS works by their creators, but we think are imbued with an STS ethos, and therefore, weave them into a tapestry of “could-be-STS.” Thinking with Sharon Traweek’s (2021) ideas of going against and beyond epistemic classifications, taking advantage of epistemic faultlines, and building meshworks as alternatives to rigid and privileged disciplinary boundaries, we turn to three cases as a different kind of STS in translation: Ahmet İnam’s newspaper column, Fatih Artvinli’s article about the journal *Şizofrenji*, and a conversation with Can Candan about a historical figure in nuclear science in Turkey.

By rendering these stories visible, we aim to go against the tide: rather than engaging with STS within the current visible discussions of alluring issues (i.e. AI, digital technologies, or big data), we excavate, re-read and translate examples of an already existing intellectual field in Turkey (on issues of knowledge production and politics of knowledge) into the transnational landscape of STS.

Our first example is a column on science and education called *Gönülden Bilime*, written by Ahmet İnam at the daily newspaper Cumhuriyet (2000–2008). In this public space, İnam argued for a different kind of science and university. Being a professor of philosophy at METU, one of the best examples of a technical university, his harshest criticism to universities is not the lack of scientific rigor, but uncritically replicating the technical know-how. His main critique of the current university environment and structure is similar to Nalbantoğlu's criticism against the neoliberal university of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: that the university became too technical and instrumental, mainly serving the industry and profit. These criticisms also extend to the political pressures on universities threatening academic autonomy and freedom, and speak to the current state of affairs in Turkey's universities more than ever. In this regard, we see Nalbantoğlu's call for opening up the discussion for a different kind of university useful as well as İnam's contemplations on the question of "what kind of a university."¹²

İnam advocates for more autonomy, academic independence, equal access to education, and community- and ecology- driven research, but he is also after the idea of "university for people," which he describes as a place where love and joy of the search for knowledge can flourish and remain vibrant. Similar to Nalbantoğlu's insistence on the importance of sociological realities of a given place, İnam's criticisms for the existing practices of knowledge production seems in line with STS discussions, and bringing İnam's works (2003, 2004) into the world of STS provides us a new analytic to practice STS in Turkey; namely, *gönül bilimi* [science of gönül].¹³

The article where he explains the name of his column elaborates on an ideal of "affective science" (İnam 2003): The Turkish word *gönül* used in the title is one of several for the English word "heart," but it defines heart strictly in the metaphorical and emotional sense of the word. In one of his columns, İnam says science is understood as a dogmatic set of rules and heart relates to empty sentimentality that cannot come together with science, but love and science cannot be separated for someone who can engage in scientific research with creativity. İnam emphasizes joy, pleasure, and overall a different kind of relationship with knowledge rather than a sense of duty or self-interest; rejecting the dichotomy between reason and emotion by offering *gönül* instead, saying "*gönül* is neither reason nor emotion, it is both." We can relate this idea to the sense of devotion with passion that Evelyn Fox Keller (1984) describes for Barbara McClintock, where "a feeling for the organism" comes from internalized knowledge that goes beyond simply following a particular

¹² This question has recently evolved into a research area under *IstanbulLab*, which also laid the ground for the emergence of "Science, Culture, and University" working group. This working group has developed a collective bibliography project bringing together works on universities published in Turkish. See: (see [Science, Culture, and University Working Group 2021](#)).

¹³ The critiques of the dichotomy of reason and feeling stand at the core of STS literature (e.g., [Haraway 1988](#)). Recent research has also taught us the active role of emotion and affective labor in doing science (e.g., [Myers 2015](#); [Pickersgill 2012](#); [Fitzgerald 2013](#)). İnam's *gönül bilimi* may stand as a framework to bring these STS discussions together, providing us a way to translate such STS literature into the context of Turkey.

methodology. This experience of being immersed in what you are researching and producing knowledge out of this experience is what İnam proposes as the kind of science we need as a society, and the university he advocated for as an institution.

The second example we would like to discuss is a journal called *Şizofrenji*, through an essay that historian of psychiatry Fatih Artvinli (2019a) wrote for the “Innovating STS” exhibit by reading the journal as a work of STS.¹⁴ Feeling for the STS ethos in *Şizofrenji* urged us to hear more about the story of the journal from Artvinli as a historian of psychiatry and a former employee of a mental institution. Artvinli starts his essay with his own experiences of first discovering the journal while he was a teenager in a small town of Turkey in the 1990s.

I’m fifteen, the year is 1992, and the place is Artvin—a little border town in the furthest northeast of Turkey . . . a border between the two worlds . . . Two steps ahead, the vast Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had dissolved; thus, the effect of the great downfall and the disintegration is everywhere . . . I remember that TV has been the Pentagon’s box for a couple of years now: The bombing of Iraq by the US, the launching of patriots and scouts rockets on CNN, the images of oil-coated, moribund cormorants . . . I want to say that what I describe is utterly a “mad world,” yet this is not the madness of the mad people I know, not of those I love. This is the madness of a cruel and unfair new mind, which is deprived of the soul to get mad. (*ibid.*, 1–2)

This setting in which Artvinli discovered *Şizofrenji* shaped the way he was able to see the borders, disintegration, and madness in the ways that he described in his article. His initial fascination with this journal changed shape in time and matured as he first became a health professional himself and later when he became a historian. Artvinli describes *Şizofrenji* as “the most bizarre, the smartest, and the most insane” journal. It is indeed all of these things, and a one of a kind journal, which we also read as an STS artifact defying epistemic boundaries and classifications of normalcy, mental health, art, authorship and ownership of authoritative knowledge about insanity. It was a journal published between the years of 1992–1998, with the leadership of psychiatry assistant Fatih Altınöz, working at Bakırköy Mental Hospital, the biggest and most famous mental hospital in Turkey. In addition to essays by psychiatrists and translations of some anti-psychiatry literature, it included stories, essays, and poems written by mental patients themselves about their experiences with mental illness, pondering the idea of madness and normalcy. Starting in its first issue as a small, photocopied fanzine, it quickly became an underground sensation in the literary and critical circles in Turkey.

Şizofrenji subverted the psychiatric gaze focused on the patient onto the practice itself, and put the object of this gaze in the subject position by creating a space for the patient to produce knowledge about their “insanity.” In this way, it created a type of epistemic faultline that Traweek (2021) defines as “where conceptual ruptures appear both routinely and unexpectedly” (*ibid.*, 61–2). Assembled by psychiatrists and psychiatric patients, this was the first popular journal that treated both parties in this traditionally hierarchical medical relationship as equals, creating and questioning the knowledge on mental health and normalcy together. Artvinli (2019a) eloquently unpacks this sense of subversion and self-reflection in the

¹⁴ Artvinli’s essay is also available in Turkish (see [Artvinli 2019b](#)).

paragraph where he describes the authorship position of mental patients as a kind of “democratic psychiatry.”

What was genuine about *Şizofrenji* was the participation of the patients with their essays and poems. With Italy’s radical and charismatic psychiatrist’s Franco Basaglia’s words, *Şizofrenji* was in the attempt of creating some kind of “democratic psychiatry” (*psichiatria democratica*). The patients’ writings were putting the magazine into a different position principally in two axes: First, their thoughts and critics on madness, psychiatry, and psychiatrists were based on their own experiences, and diseases; and the second, literary works they write were presenting another kind of reality and the world of image. Notably, through this second axis, *Şizofrenji* was separating itself from other writers and genres; and that was the key to a different literary experience in the eyes of the reader. ([Ibid., 4](#))

Inviting Artvinli as a collaborator in our excavation process has been invaluable: we learned alongside him how to consider *Şizofrenji* as a work that can support STS practices in Turkey. This experience further directed our attention to the importance of public spaces as places of STS, showing potential ways to democratize science and knowledge production processes.

Our last example is a layered story, similar to nesting dolls ([Erol 2019](#)). It starts with a dinner conversation we had with the academic and documentary filmmaker Can Candan over the field of STS, and his latest documentary project, *Nuclear Allaturca*. Candan told us about a story he haphazardly ran into while researching the earlier discussions on nuclear energy in Turkey. It was the story of Sitki Bey, an amateur scientist who claimed to discover a new atomic model in the 1930s, presented his model to M. Kemal Atatürk and scholars of his time, also applied to the Nobel prize for physics, however, did not manage to get the recognition that he had hoped for; he was however, prominent enough in his time to meet with the President and appear in the newspapers, yet disappeared from the history of nuclear science.

Candan thought that this story was in line with our conversation about STS, despite being basically unknown to historians of science. Candan himself is not formally a historian of science, and his documentary is not aimed at an academic audience. However, it involves a tremendous (and ingeniously conducted) amount of research and systematic knowledge collection, as well as the effort to be presented as a form of activism blended with public understanding of science. This dinner conversation led to a video interview we did with him on the story of Sitki Bey ([Alkan, Erol, and Candan 2019](#)). In this case, Candan became part of our excavation process as an interviewee but not necessarily as a collaborator the way Artvinli was: we invited him to tell us about his own process of knowledge production, and how the history of science matters in his documentary-making process. We consider/translate the documentary both to a form of knowledge-making that engages with the history of science, and a form of science communication that aims to inform the public on nuclear energy.

These three examples open up the question of knowledge production in a public space, yet they differ from each other in the ways they (re)construct knowledge production. In our first example, İnam questions universities as spaces of knowledge production and scientists as subjects of knowledge production in a public space, a newspaper column. His position is using a public platform outside of the university, with a desire to change what is going on inside an institution. In our second example, Artvinli reads *Şizofrenji* as a place of questioning the mental institution in the way that it both produces and practices knowledge about sanity. Mental patients as the objects of scientific knowledge become producers of knowledge through this

experimental publication, blurring the boundaries between subject and object. This is an intervention coming from the inside of an institution, a transformation reflected on an outside world. In our last example, we focus on yet another public space of knowledge production, a documentary-in-the-making on nuclear energy in Turkey. Here, we trace the story of Sitki Bey, who was a knowledge producer in atomic science. However, we listen to this story from Candan, the producer of the documentary as a history of science artifact. This time, the subject of (past) scientific knowledge becomes the object of knowledge in a different time, in the eyes of a filmmaker with a completely different take on nuclear energy than Sitki Bey.

The different media through which these works are publicized remind us of—the diversity of ways for doing STS—as well as showing the possibility of directions that could further open-up STS. Integrating the kind of works like these examples (which already exist in the public sphere into the universe of STS) enables us to find ways to “do STS” in Turkey. This attempt for integration reverses the more familiar idea of translation, that is, of translating academic works into the public space. Instead, in this essay, we follow already existing works, perspectives, and knowledge, and translate them into the academic arena. This approach, of course, requires more systematic research than what we merely scratch the surface of in this article.

Conclusion

We opened this essay with a quotation from Bora, underlying the necessity to be sensitive to *memleket* as social scientists. The gist of our motivation behind telling a story of STS *in and through* Turkey lies in this sensitivity, and has less to do with representing STS at a nation-state scale. We first told an institutional story of STS *in* Turkey through particular translation processes happening in a transnational space and resulting with places opened for STS in universities. We approached scholars as translators, and discussed how their individual efforts made the placement of STS in universities possible as well as their limits in institutionalizing STS in Turkey given the hardships posed by politico-bureaucratic structures in Turkey. Then, we shifted our focus toward the generative role of those hardships and turned to the ways of practicing STS “outside” universities with a question of doing STS *through* Turkey. In doing so, we emphasized the importance of curating hybrid knowledge spaces on the basis of *STS Muhabbetleri*, which was designed as part of IstanbulLab’s ongoing effort to democratize technoscientific knowledge-making processes in Turkey. These discussions have shown us that the translation of STS through opening and curating new places/spaces either in universities or the public realm has gone hand-in-hand with reflexive and critical endeavors about technoscientific developments and knowledge production processes in the country. The lessons we learned from these practices lead us to claim for STS in Turkey as a space that enables *going against the tide* by being attuned to the sensibilities and realities of *memleket*, and search for ways to democratize technoscientific processes.

In the last part, we discussed several works already existing in Turkey that were not yet visible in the space of STS because producers of these works are not situated as STS scholars. By reading them as works supporting STS practices in Turkey, and, thereby, translating those works into the worlds of STS, we aimed to extend mainstream and visible STS places beyond their conventional limits. Assuming the role of the translator, we also encouraged other scholars to put on “STS glasses” to look at these works. This was an insightful effort, reflecting further on what it would mean to practice STS in Turkey and how these practices

could contribute to the transnational space of STS. Although it is important to demystify the university environment as the first and foremost site of knowledge production, such efforts should not be considered only as experiments to go beyond conventional STS places but also as a necessity to open public places for STS in a country where politico-bureaucratic structures constrict meaningful institutionalization of STS.

Refusing to stay within the boundaries of institutions as an act of defying the system is an honorable existence as well as sometimes being a privilege. For those whose material existence does not necessarily depend on the support of a stable employment in a place where other institutions such as a working legal system, livable minimum wage, and unemployment benefits exist, it is a viable route. For example, the realities of “Academics for Peace” in Turkey involves not only losing their academic jobs, but a civil death, where they are blacklisted and without an ability to find any kind of paid employment within the university system. Thus, being pushed out of the system altogether, opened up new possibilities such as cafe-library hybrids set-up by some of these academics, creating alternative and free open universities, and new meshworks of solidarity. However, we hesitate to rejoice at these new forms of knowledge making at the face of such systemic violence, while simultaneously admiring and celebrating the ingenuity and resilience of their creators. “Staying with trouble” is not a choice for some of us ([Haraway 2016](#)). Such is the condition of the *memleket*.

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Data Availability

Supplemental data published in this original research article can be accessed in STS Infrastructures at: <https://n2t.net/ark:/81416/p4688h>.

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