

*A Strangeness in My Mind*. By Orhan Pamuk. Faber & Faber, 2015, 602 pp., £6.99.

Following the election victories of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) since 2002, the secular and the middle class people of Turkey ask the same question: "I do not know anyone voting for the AKP in my circle. Who is voting for them?" *A Strangeness in My Mind*, Nobel winning author Orhan Pamuk's book published in 2015, attempts to answer this question by telling the life story of a *boza* (a traditional thick, fermented and milked drink) and yoghurt peddler Mevlüt Karataş between the years 1969 and 2012. In doing so, Pamuk comprehensively reverberates the sociological, economic and political transformation of Turkish society through the lens of Mevlüt, whose Karataş family moved from Beyşehir, a small town in central Anatolia, to Istanbul and began living under poor conditions in a suburban neighborhood.

Unlike his relatives, Mevlüt is less capable of adapting to the environmental circumstances and misses opportunities to increase his welfare in Istanbul. For example, he could not understand the materialist motivations of polarisation between right-wing and left-wing groups in the 1970s. As the members of a traditional Sunni and Turkic family, his cousins are involved in the campaign to purge the Alawite and leftist families from the mixed neighborhood that they live in. Although Mevlüt thinks that this campaign is the product of an ideological competition, land valuation is the primary reason of this conflict. Furthermore, the government and the police stand by the right wing group and help them to expel the residents viewed as *persona non-grata* citizens by the government, due to their ethnic identities or ideological tendencies. Following the expulsion of these people, the government provides license for the illegally built houses, called *gecekondu*, and creates ground rent. That is to say, right wing groups collaborating with the government increase their wealth because of their loyalty. In conclusion, Pamuk aims to picture power and the role of government in the creation and the transfer of wealth among citizens. Unsurprisingly, in the final stage of the book, the sons of the right wing group leaders in the 1970s transform into businessmen leading luxurious residential projects in the same neighborhood, with the help of their intimacy with the AKP in 2012. Therefore, it would not be wrong to argue that Pamuk regards the AKP as a continuation of the tradition, which is based on strong state apparatus and weak society loyal to the official state discourse.

Nevertheless, Mevlüt Karataş is not cut out for this game. That is why he has a strangeness in his mind. He could never understand the causal connections between phenomena. For example, he does not grasp how his relatives make

money while he barely maintains his life as a peddler. However, he does not insist on thinking about such strange situations and he is resigned to his fate. His marriage is also a strangeness. He and his cousin, Süleyman Karataş, fall in love with the same girl, but Mevlüt does not know his cousin's feelings. Moreover, Mevlüt sees the girl across the crowded dance floor in a wedding ceremony but does not know her name. The girl's name is Samiha and she is the sister of Korkut Karataş's wife. Korkut is the elder brother of Süleyman and the cousin of Mevlüt. Nevertheless, in response to Mevlüt's question asking what the girl's name is, Süleyman says Rayiha, another sister of Korkut's wife. At the end of the day, Mevlüt starts to send love letters to Rayiha instead of the girl that he saw in the ceremony. This picture becomes more complicated after Mevlüt elopes with Rayiha at night with the help of Süleyman. Next morning, Mevlüt understands that he eloped with the wrong girl but complies with this situation and gets married to her. In time, Süleyman's game prevails but Mevlüt does not confront him. This story is a perfect example of the rules of the game in Turkish society. In line with the terminology of social capital thesis, it is safe to argue that there is a lack of trust among the individuals and there is a zero-sum game in the society. This means that for one to win the other should lose and there is no moral framework in this competition. Similar to expulsion of the Alawite people by using brutal force from the neighborhood, Süleyman views cheating his cousin as a legitimate strategy to eliminate the competitors and get the girl he loves. Nevertheless, winning a competition also undermines the total trust in the system and a Hobbesian psychology dominates the relations between individuals.

In line with these points, the story of Mevlüt Karataş raises a critical question of political science. What is the causal connection between the formation of the institutions and the sociological structure? The discussions centre on whether the formal institutions shape the structure of a society, or vice versa. Pamuk does not directly address this question. However, the political transformation of Turkey over four decades and the life stories of the Karataş family are reminiscent of the views of Charles Tilly, who argues that characteristics of a regime are determined by the resistance capacity of individuals in a country. That is to say, urbanisation and capitalisation levels of a country determine the degree of government dominance and identify the regime's type. Tilly's argument acquires meaning when Karataş family's urbanisation and capitalisation story is considered. The family moves from a rural village to Istanbul. The state supports their urbanisation process. Furthermore, the family members accumulate capital helped by their good standing with the government over 40 years. The Karataş family is embedded into the state and has no autonomous position, which is a necessary condition for non-state actors to check and balance the government. In addition,

resources are limited if they are provided by the state. This creates a competition among the citizens to gain as many resources as possible. Being intimate with the government is the simplest way of achieving this end. This explains the never ending polarised atmosphere in Turkey, because competition over the limited resources has to produce winners and losers. And it should be noted again, winning this game requires courting the state rather than having meritocratic abilities.

At the end of the day, it should not be surprising to see that the AKP has crafted an authoritarian agenda, especially after eliminating military influence in politics. There has been a sociological ground, which has been properly designed by the established paradigm of Turkey's administrative philosophy, and formal instruments to retain the state's supreme authority over society. Thus, the AKP's success story could be defined as an amalgamation of strong state apparatus and popular support.

*A Strangeness in My Mind* is a seminal work to understand the political culture and social atmosphere that gave birth to the rise of the AKP. Unlike his previous books, mostly dealing with the complications among secular, urbanised and middle or upper middle class people, Pamuk reveals the life story of Mevlüt Karataş in order to explore the world of Istanbul's *gecekondu* neighbourhoods, populated by semi-rural/semi urban and semi-modern/semi-traditional people. In doing so, Pamuk applies a retrospective analysis, examines the social mobility of the Karataş family and focuses on the role of economic and political instruments in their social transformation. Therefore, the terms of land valuation, wealth transfer by the state, ground rent, persona non-grata identities and lack of trust help us to analyse the social base of AKP rule. However, Mevlüt Karataş, as a loser in this game, also votes for Erdoğan and there should be a certain term to explain his voting behaviour. Orhan Pamuk coins the term 'strangeness' while I suggest using 'resignation to fate'.

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