Bogazici Honorary Degree Acceptance Speech
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Seyla Benhabib
Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy
Yale University

I

Let me begin by expressing my deepest thanks and appreciation to the Rector, Kadri Ozcaldiran; Provost Yesim Arat; Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Gulen Greenwood, and the Faculty of Bogazici University – among whom are many friends and colleagues and former class-mates. Although I have left these shores more than 40 years ago, in September 1970, in the last decade we have grown more connected than ever: nearly every two years this Institution sends me extraordinary students, some of whom are now teaching at institutions like Columbia, or studying at Harvard and other places.

I want to begin by reminiscing about that remarkable space, the American College for Girls that nurtured so many of us in this room. John Freely’s
history of both institutions, the Robert College and the ACG, the predecessors of Bogazici, tells us that in view of the success of Robert College, a group dedicated to women’s education in Massachusetts thought that it would be important to establish a girl’s college as well. According to historical documents, “when Hamlin Hall was but four years old, a young American woman joined the faculty of the Home School in Üsküdar, on the eastern side of the Bosphorus. Like Cyrus Hamlin, Mary Mills Patrick was a person of many parts – a scholar, an administrator, a fundraiser and a believer in certain perilously modern ideas. She firmly believed in and advocated the equality of nations, the equality of the sexes, and higher education for women. With the help of Caroline Borden, an American philanthropist, she transformed the ‘‘Home School’’ into an institution of higher learning for girls. In 1890, a charter from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was obtained, empowering her school to confer the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Thus was The American College for Girls created, with Mary Mills Patrick as its president, a post she was to hold until 1924. After the destruction of the main building by a fire, the school was rebuilt on the hills of Arnavutkoy.” (http://portal.robcol.k12.tr/Default.aspx?pgID=137; accessed May 27, 2012)
In 1966, I entered the ACG after graduating from the English High School for Girls. I recall some of those extra-ordinary women whose teaching, and even more perhaps, whose very presence in Istanbul of the 1960’s and 70’s, made such an impression upon us. These women were pioneers, educators, adventurers: some had lost their husbands in the Great War; others had husbands who had been wounded in that War; still others loved the Orient but seemed distinctively out of place in it such as Mme. Tuserie, our French teacher at EHSG whom we teased mercilessly. Some left the EHSG to join the ACG. If I am not mistaken, our geometry teacher Ms. McIntosh; later named Mrs. Dabanowitch, did so.

Among our teachers at the ACG, the ones who made the deepest impression on me were Mrs. Dorothy Iz, professor of comparative and world literature; our philosophy teachers, Mrs. Neyire Baysal, who was the Turkish Head Mistress of ACG and who did not like my leftist politics, and Miss Matilde Kamber. I adored Ms. Kamber and she was the one who gave me my first philosophical bug. This was when the arc of my future life met my life in the Arnavutkoy of the late 1960’s.

Both Neyire Baysal and Matilde Kamber had been students of Hans Reichenbach. As is well-known, throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s German, as well as German-Jewish refugees, had come to Turkey. Some may have
been invited by Ataturk and the Administration of Istanbul University to restructure the old Ottoman institution into one of modern learning; others were communists and socialists such as Ernst Reuter, who remained in Turkey from 1935 to 1946 and helped organize the municipality administration in Ankara, as well as contributing to the building up of a modern tax system.

Among German philosophers who visited Turkey during those years were: Ernst von Aster, Walter Kranz, Joachim Ritter, Erich Rothacker, Arnold Gehlen, Hans Freyer and Renée König. Takivettin Mengusoglu had written his dissertation with Nicolai Hartmann, and Macit Gökberk with Eduard Spranger. Through their teaching and influence, German philosophy would become known, and in particular the work of Nicolai Hartmann and Max Scheler was introduced to a Turkish audience through the efforts of Professor Mengusoglu.

Reichenbach was a German-Jewish refugee of the Vienna School of Positivism. Subsequently, he would migrate to UCLA and influence Willard van Orman Quine as well as Hillary Putnam, legendary names in twentieth-century analytical philosophy.

Ms. Kamber taught two courses: Introduction to Philosophy, which may have been a required course for us all, and 20th Century Philosophy, an
elective course for which I wrote a paper on Bertrand Russell’s “logical atomism.”

This would serve me well when I started my B.A. Studies at Brandeis University in 1970. There, I was drawn to the History of Ideas Program, chaired by Alasdair MacIntyre, who had himself replaced Herbert Marcuse, who had already departed for San Diego. MacIntyre was teaching a course called “Hegel and his Aftermath,” dealing with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. During one of the very first sessions, MacIntyre made an analogy between the opening arguments of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Russell’s logical atomism. Ms. Kamber’s teaching served me well. I raised my hand and made some smart-alleck comment on whether or not the analogy was proper. That question made such a good impression on MacIntyre that he accepted to advise my senior thesis on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* during my senior year.

No account of those years can be adequate without some mention of the political turmoil of the 1960’s. Student movements from Berkeley to Paris had erupted; the Prague Spring of 1968 was crushed by Soviet tanks, and of course, the war in Vietnam escalated. Our naïve “love affair” with the US was about to experience its deepest disappointment as some of our teachers, who themselves may have been draft resisters, told us about the War and
photographs started circulating first in Robert College and then in ACG of the use of napalm bombs in Vietnam. We stared in amazement at the bodies of children and old men and women charred by napalm bombs.

The fast-moving political events of Turkey at that time were even more intense and dangerous: this was the period of DEV-GENC, DISK; the setting on fire by students at METU of Ambassador Robert Komer’s car in 1969; and relations between Turkish militant groups and the PLO were intensifying. Confrontations with the police and the army were routine and there were more and more arms smuggled into university buildings and meetings. The student movement was like a train destined for a wreck, and I, like many others, was a passenger riding this train. When the military coup of 1972 came, the price it extracted from some close friends, who would be imprisoned and tortured, was enormous. Whether out of guilt or out of fear (which was not ungrounded), I could not come back to Turkey until 1978, after a conference in Dubrovnik-Yugoslavia.

These are the years invoked by Maureen Freely in her book, “The Life of the Party,” in which I am portrayed as rabidly anti-American. Maureen, whom I have subsequently met in Europe during public meetings and who has done a great service to contemporary Turkish culture through her excellent translations of Orhan Pamuk, did not quite get it right: we were among those
whose “American hearts were broken” by the US government; we were not “anti-American”; we stood in a long tradition of American dissent, beginning with Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond.

No account of my early intellectual years would be sufficient without recounting my encounter with Jurgen Habermas. He has been my teacher for over thirty years and as the years have passed, a friendship has developed among our families. In 1972 I was admitted to Yale’s Philosophy Department. My discovery in the next few years of the work of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas was simultaneous. I read “The Human Condition” (Arendt) and “Knowledge and Human Interests” (Habermas) during the same years. In 1977 Habermas was invited to give one of the Ernst Cassirer lectures to a packed audience at Yale. It was shortly after Arendt’s death in 1975 and Habermas held a lecture that was later to become the basis of his “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power.” I asked him a question about fame and immortality in Arendt’s text or something like that. That evening we, the philosophy students took him out to dinner at the restaurant the “Old Heidelberg.” The next morning I had breakfast with him at Davenport College at Yale and told him that I wanted to come and study with him in Germany. The rest, as they say, is history: in the summer of 1979 I arrived as an Alexander von Humboldt fellow in
Prien-am-Chiemsee, a small town to the south of Munich, to learn German, and thus started my decade-long study with Habermas, first in Munich and then in Frankfurt. I believe that especially in subjects like philosophy that are so abstract in their conceptualization, and so lonely in their process of cogitation, there is no substitute for the experience of learning to think from and alongside a great teacher.

I could continue in this vein, but instead I want to take a more theoretical turn and ask: what was it, and is it, about the German philosophical tradition, from Hegel, on whom I wrote my dissertation, to Arendt, Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas and many others, that provided me, a child of Sephardic parents from Turkey, with the language of philosophical reflection? Why is it that this tradition, rather than the analytical philosophy to which I was exposed as a student, or the French philosophical tradition admired by so many in Turkey, that influenced my philosophical orientation? This last winter I had time to reflect upon these questions intensely since I was awarded the Rabbi Leopold Lucas prize in Germany just a month ago, on May 8th 2012. Rabbi Lucas had perished in Theresienstadt and his wife, in Auschwitz. I believe that it is this German and German-Jewish encounter with political and cultural modernity that has
provided me with the mirror in which to see reflected my own experiences as a Turkish-Jew and a child of Ataturk’s republic.

II

In the European-Jewish encounter with political modernity a fundamental conflict reveals itself that is based upon the contradictory presuppositions of every nation-state. Today at a time when the weaknesses of the Westphalian state-system are becoming increasingly apparent, and when the alternative set of institutions that ought to transcend this system are still remote, we can identify some of these paradoxes more vividly. The dignity of equal citizenship for all and the sovereignty claims of the nation are the dual sources of legitimacy of the modern nation-state, and the tensions among them have accompanied and enframed our political experiences since the bourgeois democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

From Hannah Arendt to Hans Kelsen, from Leo Strauss to Hersch Lauterpacht, Jewish political and legal thinkers of the previous century have grappled with both dimensions of this paradox. While Kelsen, in his famous words, came to the conclusion that “Souveranität muss verdrängt werden” [“Sovereignty must be repressed”], Hannah Arendt translated the political paradoxes of modernity into the demand that “the right to have rights” ought to be respected for all humans. Yet it is also in her work that we encounter
the deepest awareness that to be a rights-bearing individual is to belong to a political commonwealth that defends and upholds one’s right to have rights. The “right to have rights” does not assume a pre-political natural individual, as conceived of fictionally in natural rights theories, but rather, it refers to the civil condition of the legal person and the citizen who belongs to a polity. But if the sovereignty of the nation is interpreted in such a way that those bearing certain identity-markers are precluded from belonging to it, popular sovereignty could lead to the denial of the “right to have rights” to some.

Hannah Arendt was skeptical that international institutions established in the wake of WW II, such as the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or even legal instruments such as The Geneva Conventions on the Status of Refugees (1951), could ever satisfactorily resolve these paradoxes of the modern nation-state. Kelsen and Lauterpacht, by contrast, as international jurists, insisted that unless the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were protected by an International Human Rights Court they would remain ineffectual. Leo Straus, on the other hand, saw revealed in the aporetic structure of the modern nation-state the hidden conflict between the political theology of sovereignty and the self-assertion claims of the modern individual.
Upon a closer analysis, this aporia of political modernity reveals the following structure: Ideally, democratic rule means that all members of a sovereign body are to be respected as bearers of human rights, and that the consociates of this sovereign freely associate with one another to establish a regime of self-governance under which each is to be considered both author of the laws and subject to them. This ideal of the original contract, as formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and adopted by Immanuel Kant, is a heuristically useful device for capturing the logic of modern democracies.

Modern democracies, unlike their ancient counterparts, conceive of their citizens as rights-bearing consociates. The rights of the citizens rest upon the “rights of man.” “Les droits de l’homme et du citoyen” do not contradict one another; quite to the contrary, they are coimplicated. This is the idealized logic of the modern democratic revolutions since the American and French examples, and in our days, it has been universalized into the modern state-form, respected by many even if not the majority, of the 195 states in the world.

The democratic sovereign draws its legitimacy not merely from its act of constitution, but equally significantly, from the conformity of this act to universal principles of human rights that are in some sense said to precede and antedate the will of the sovereign and in accordance with which the
sovereign undertakes to bind itself. “We, the people” refers to a particular human community, circumscribed in space and time, sharing a particular culture, history and legacy; yet this people establishes itself as a democratic body by acting in the name of the “universal.” The tension between universal human rights claims and particularistic cultural and national identities is constitutive of democratic legitimacy. Modern democracies act in the name of universal principles which are then circumscribed within a particular civic community. This is the “Janus face of the modern nation,” in the words of Juergen Habermas.

Stated thus, it should not be difficult for many of you to recognize the conflict between the universalist ideals of the *civic nation* – the demos -and the particularistic claims of the *ethnic nation* – the ethnos- that are so deeply rooted in modern Turkey’s own formation and which have created such fundamental tensions in Ataurk’s own republican vision. For this reason, the thought of Arendt and Habermas, Kelsen and Straus, seemed to me to be but an articulation of my own experiences as a Sephardic Jew and a citizen of the new Turkish republic. These concepts needed no further translation to make sense for me.

Today contemporary Turkey is confronted with a dual challenge: the tug-of-war around the authority and composition of the Constitutional Court –
Anayasa Mahkemesi- is intrinsic to democracies in our own days: courts and parliaments must balance and check one another, and of course, the struggle of each for ascendancy is also a feature of many political systems. Yet it is through this struggle that democratic majorities learn to moderate their will in accordance with constitutional and human rights principles. However, courts can also try to place themselves above the will of the democratic people and can become deeply politicized and sectarian. It is only the vigilance of citizens and of civil and political organizations that can expose excesses on both sides, but a modern constitutional democracy without such a tug of war, is not conceivable. This is just as true of Obama’s confrontation over the Health Care bill with the US Supreme Court, as it is true about the AKP’s attempts to stuff the Turkish Constitutional Court with personalities more sympathetic to its aims.

Nor has contemporary Turkey resolved the question of the democratic constitution of its own citizenry. The conflict between the ethnic and the civic nation continues around the Kurdish issue: the boundaries of the demos are contested not only politically but even geographically. In my own work in recent years, I have developed the concept of ‘democratic iterations’ to articulate the processes through which the demos can reconstitute itself by redefining its own self-understanding such as to include all in its
understanding of citizenship and sometimes modify such citizenship through multicultural claims. This is not the place to pursue these questions further, but I just wanted to mark how the deep experiences of political modernity, as expressed by the political philosophers of German origin of the previous century, have taught me so much, in part because they brought to a higher level of articulation and reflection the very concepts and experiences of political modernity with which we, as children of Ataturk’s Republic, were and are so deeply familiar. For this and much else I am grateful to my colleagues and friends at Bogazici University for the recognition they have bestowed upon me by granting me an honorary degree. Many thanks. Tesekkur ederim!!

*This text is a revised version of the speech delivered by Seyla Benhabib upon receiving the “honorary doctorate” from Bogazici University.*