

Blast Furnaces

Yüksek Fırınlar

Presented by: Duncan Lien

Fakir Baykurt's 1983 novel *Yüksek Fırınlar* (*Blast Furnaces*) ends with the protagonist, Elif Mutlu, declaring that "before another day goes by I'm going to join the union. I'll wear a vest on the picket lines too" ("*Hem de tek gün gecikmeden sendikaya yazılacağım. Grevlerde ben de gömlek giyeceğim...*"; Baykurt 366; all translations are mine). Although the figure of the rebellious Anatolian woman who refuses to accept injustice is among Baykurt's hallmarks, the pivot to class struggle in an urban context was entirely new - previously Baykurt's oeuvre focused exclusively on rural Anatolia. In addition to representing the political landscape of Turkish-German communities in 1980, the strike plotline in the novel articulates a vision of citizenship through class struggle. Such a claim implies new forms of political collectivity that transcend received linguistic, national, and gender identities alongside a revised understanding of national identity. These aspects of the novel hinge on Elif's quest for efficacy in the domestic and public spheres and also respond to contemporary feminist critiques of leftist organisations in Turkey.

The novel is the first instalment of a trilogy of Turkish settlement in Duisburg (alongside *Koca Ren / The Mighty Rhine*, 1986 and *Yarım Ekmek / A Half Loaf*, 1998), the city where Baykurt lived from 1979 until his death in 1999. Baykurt settled in Duisburg to research a novel about labour migrants. Turkey was in a state verging on civil war at the time in which public intellectuals such as Baykurt were often the targets of political violence. This period culminated in a coup d'état in September 1980 that saw the widespread arrest or forced disappearance, imprisonment, and torture of political activists. Besides ensuring that Baykurt remained in Duisburg, the coup is a significant context to the novel, since political activity in the diaspora took on heightened importance across the political spectrum. Situated more broadly, *Yüksek Fırınlar* is an account of Turkish settlement in the FRG following the end of the formal recruitment of labour migrants from Turkey and other countries in 1973 (*der Anwerbestopp*). It follows the rural Anatolian protagonists of Baykurt's earlier work to Germany and can thus be seen as a continuation of the 'Anatolian novel' ('Anadolu romanı', a term deployed by Berna Moran, 7). This genre focused on the social changes brought about by capitalist modernisation in rural Anatolia in the mid-20th century, in which labour migration to urban centres in Turkey and Western Europe was a key process.

Although Baykurt names Elif as the protagonist, much of the novel is also narrated from her husband İbrahim's perspective, particularly the build-up to a strike at the steel mill where he works. İbrahim has lived in Duisburg for a decade when the narrative begins in December 1980, and although he and Elif have been married for several years, she has only joined him there earlier that year. Most of the novel takes place over five days when Elif gives birth to a son before concluding one month later. Initially, İbrahim is unhappy with his marriage because Elif is not as submissive as he had imagined she would be. However, when his son is born, İbrahim is momentarily elated. Yet

İbrahim comes to doubt that he is the father because his son was born too early (that is to say, not exactly nine months and ten days after conception, as İbrahim believes). These qualms lead İbrahim to attack Elif in her hospital bed, having concluded the only possible explanation is that she has been unfaithful. A paternity test eventually confirms that the child is his, but Elif is understandably distant from her husband, a conflict that is not resolved in the novel. Instead, Elif charts a course toward economic independence from her husband.

Baykurt narrates the plotline related to the strike from the perspective of İbrahim and his colleagues in the steel mill. Those who are politically active are worried about securing the votes of Turkish workers to call a strike, viewing the labour struggle as a test of solidarity between German-born and migrant workers. It quickly becomes evident that İbrahim is the object of an ideological tug-of-war between his socialist colleagues and a nationalist Islamic organisation represented by a character known as the Garbage Man Imam (*Çöpçü İmam*), a reference to his previous line of work. An Islamo-nationalist organisation - an allusion to the Millî Görüş movement - enables his career change. This subplot unmistakably registers Baykurt's critique of the growing sway of Islamo-nationalist organisations in the Turkish diaspora at the time, a prescient political insight in its own right. The Garbage Man Imam's attempts to persuade İbrahim to attend prayers more often and more importantly to undermine the strike fall on deaf ears. Yet neither does İbrahim rally around the union. As he recedes into apathy, it is Elif who comes to the fore as the positive hero in the novel. Her friend Renate encourages her to visit the picket lines. Impressed by the carnivalesque atmosphere Elif declares her intention to learn to read and write and find a job. Thus, like the marital strife between Elif and İbrahim, the political conflict of the novel is not resolved. However, this plot thread ends on a distinctly positive note and underscores the imperative to take sides in class struggle. *Yüksek Fırınlar* further emphasises that labour migration is an opportunity for the working class, but one that can only be fully realised through the development of political organisations that transcend received categories of nation, class and gender.

The carnivalesque, almost utopian, portrayal of the strike during Elif's visit to the picket lines most clearly expresses the necessity to reinvent the structures of working-class politics (and by extension conceptions of German citizenship and national identity). The multinational character of the movement is underscored by explicit appeals to international solidarity, further noteworthy because "internationale Solidarität" appears untranslated throughout the novel. This decision is representative of the novel's bilingualism. Besides code-switching, readers will note frequent representations of translation and references to the act (e.g. "The doctor is coming Mrs. Mutlu [. . .], translated Kismet"; "*Kismet*, 'Doktor geliyor, Elif Hanım [. . .]!' diye çeviri yaptı"; Baykurt 166), a glossary of German words used in the novel, and bilingual portmanteaux. In short, Baykurt's bilingual practice corresponds to the forms of political solidarity that the novel represents and the new forms of political collectivity Baykurt figures. In this spirit, the linguistic multiplicity in the migrant milieu where the novel is set does not hamper communication; instead, characters wield the same linguistic strategies Baykurt himself used in writing the novel so that multilingualism functions as a potent tool for organising beyond received practices of language, nation and gender. In addition to Elif's declarations, for example, the strike scene (among others) features pointed displays of friendship between characters from Turkey and Greece.

The role Elif assumes in this closing scene also carries a political significance vis-à-vis feminism, which I will briefly touch on in conclusion. As noted above, Elif stands in a long line of female protagonists in Baykurt's work who free themselves from the constraints of the patriarchal social structures of rural Anatolia. Yet by connecting Elif's liberation to formal leftist organisations, the plot strongly resonates with the critique made by many women on the Turkish left in the 1970s that

women's liberation was a prerequisite to political organising (and not to be deferred to a post-capitalist society). Serkan Çınar's work on Turkish-German "left feminist" organisations in the FRG indicates that engagement with the basic challenges (such as literacy) that women like Elif faced were key to the emergence of these groups. Elif's story also intervenes in the discourse of migration in the FRG, countering the figure of the passive, oppressed Muslim woman that took on an increasingly central role in the emergent xenophobic discourse in the 1980s (where the trope served as a barometer of the incompatibility of Islamic others with West German society; Chin 141-43).

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Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

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