

A Genius, Rebellious and Totally Suspicious Journal: Şizofrenği*

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Translated into English by Merve Şen†

I'm fifteen, the year is 1992, and the place is Artvin – a little border town in the furthest northeast of Turkey. Border. Where? Towards an entirely different world than our own. Instead, a border between the two worlds. And perhaps, more accurately, a border that starts to be exceeded and eroded by the year. 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. And, one of the pieces of this disruption had fallen into the middle of our little town in the shape of a Russian market. For a while, tired and foreign people from far and near lands – beginning with close neighbours such as Georgia and Azerbaijan – are coming to the town. How do they come? Mostly, they come by their Lada cars. By Lada cars, packed with such stuff they squeeze into the baggage and think they could sell. They are as if they came straight out of the great Russian novels I've just started to read in those years: mujiks, comrades, the proletariat, and further on Natashas, who have nothing to sell but their bodies. From hammer and sickle badges to Red Army uniforms; from kaleidoscope to flasks; from a variety of cigarettes to accordions; from bicycles to small screen TV's everything is there. 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. Later, we were going to learn that the cormorant images have nothing to do with Iraq though. What was fighting for its life wasn't the cormorant; it was the oil-coated civilisation stripped from its senses and humanity. 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

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love. This is the madness of a cruel and unfair new mind, which is deprived of the soul to get mad.

Was it different in Turkey, then? Well, it was not. Rather, it was dominated by a similar mind, considering itself invincible. A mind that belongs to a cruel and a brave new world, that has been prevailed since 1980 Turkish coup d'état (September 12), as I have learned afterwards. And me. In a forgotten town, that has no way to come close to such a big world, studying at the vocational school of health, and dreaming of becoming a health officer, so I can both work and study at the college without being a burden on the family. My older brother, who is a veterinary technician, sets an example for me, in that sense. Taner has a small library back then – a key to the knowledge of the world. The shelves are full of magazines as well as books. From rural poetry zines to national literature and art magazines; from daily newspapers to weekly and monthly political journals, and comics, the shelves are like a “heaven of periodicals.” The one that is most memorable for me was, of course, the one that is the most unique of all: *Şizofrenji*; the most bizarre, the smartest, and the most insane.

The years passed. In those years I've read *Şizofrenji* – the legendary magazine of my youth, I couldn't have known that I would have become a historian of psychiatry and worked as a health officer in Bakırköy for four years while writing my doctoral thesis¹, and therefore walked through the services that the psychiatrists and the patients whose writings I read curiously, once have lived and breath. That is, I would arrive at the land of *Şizofrenji* one day. The only thing that I know is the feeling I feel while leafing through the pages of *Şizofrenji* once again for this essay. *Şizofrenji* was a peerless and a gripping story, indeed!

Şizofrenji was born in Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital – the largest psychiatric hospital in Turkey – in February 1992. Rather, “a sacred magazine descended into the earth,” I should say, perhaps. *Şizofrenji* is one of the unique examples in the history of magazines in Turkey. A magazine its readers still mention as “legendary” after all those years. A magazine remembered by its supposedly folk saying slogan beginning with the second issue: “we are in suspicion, totally!”

Şizofrenji was published by psychiatry assistants and patients gathered under the guidance of Fatih Altınöz. They had put together the 24 pages first issue in a xerox machine as 200 copies. Given that this was a magazine that has been published in a psychiatric hospital, it has been thought that the magazine will be circulated around a limited milieu, in the institute only. Yet, beyond what is imagined, it's been welcomed warmly outside the hospital walls as well, and the second issue has reached 1200 copies, and the third one to 3000 copies. Well, some legends are as such: They are not measured by the number of its readers, but rather by whispering if there is such a measurement. By a "read-and-tell network," that is to say. In that sense, we can describe *Şizofrenji* as an "underground" magazine² or a rebellious one: challenging the capitalism that devalues everything, the consumer society, individualism, cheap literature, intimidating elitism, so-called democracy, institutions' and the society's grasp of human, and of course, more than any of these, the current psychiatry practice and the madness – everything that Turkey and the world are drifted into during the 90s.

The title of the magazine is definitely the product of a quick-wit. Consisting of the two seemingly irrelevant words, it has a striking power in Turkish. 'Şizofreni' (*schizophrenia*) means 'splitting of the mind.' The inventor of the name, Fatih Altınöz, adds an addition 'g' to 'şizofreni', and combines it with a different disease, which is 'frenji' (*syphilis*). 'Frenji' is another disease that is stigmatised as much as 'şizofreni.' *Şizofrenji* can be translated into English as 'Schizo-syphilis.' Also, there are other ways of interpreting the title of *Şizofrenji*. For example, it can be considered as a new concept³ "merging 'şizofreni', the greatest disease of the mind and soul, and 'frenji', the greatest disease of the body and the skin." Or, a historian of psychiatry can comment on it as such: *Şizofrenji* can be considered as a reference to the discussions of general paralysis that affects the history of psychiatry deeply. GP, or general paralysis of the insane, emerges on the third phase of 'frenji,' and ends up with a madness accompanied by a psychiatric and a neurological scene. We should also write it down that the hundreds of 'frenji' patients who die out of this madness seen at the last stage of this disease in mental hospitals.⁴

Şizofrenji was published as 27 issues, plus three additional issues, between 1992-1998.⁵ It had varied editorial stuff. Still, we can consider the psychiatrists who work

at Bakırköy at the time – Fatih Altınöz, Yağmur Taylan, and Kültegin Ögel, and Mehmet Şenol, one of the driving forces of the magazine till the last issue – as the skeleton crew. Others psychiatrists were among this crew both with their writings and translations: Hakan Atalay, Banu Büyükkal, Ali Babaoğlu and others. What was genuine about *Şizofreni* was the participation of the patients with their essays and poems. With Italy’s radical and charismatic psychiatrist’s Franco Basaglia’s words, *Şizofreni* 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, *Şizofreni* was separating itself from other writers and genres; and that was the key to a different literary experience in the eyes of the reader.

Time to time, you would have come across some writings written anonymously or with a pseudonym, and it wouldn’t be possible to understand that whether they are written by the doctors or patients. Yet, the ones written by the patients were recognised by their uniqueness and the use of mere initials: SK, JG, M.Ç., GB, M.L.Ö., LRA, and of course, R.G.Ö.! Bakırköy’s ‘şair-i âzâm’ (*the greatest poet*) illustrious R.G.Ö.’s poem “Şizofreni” has become notorious with these lines: “The heart’s brake broke off out of my love’s severity / The doctor still thinks that I have schizophrenia.”⁶

Şizofreni was receiving various writings and poems outside the institution as well. Such important writers and poets like küçük İskender, Haydar Ergülen, Süreyya Evren, Serdar Koçak, and Ah Muhsin Ünlü (Onur Ünlü) were among the contributors. One of the most memorable sections in the magazine was “Discussions on Madness;” the discussion of three psychiatrists named Alpha, Beta, and Omega. At the beginning of the 90s, Turkey was beginning to meet psychiatrists and psychotherapists more often, and therefore, the reader has loved this section, since it expresses different opinions on the same issue, and criticises psychiatry’s dilemma and problems humorously.

Although *Şizofrenji* is considered as a literary magazine, it was read more like a “magazine of critical thinking,” whose scope varies from humour to psychoanalysis; from football to art; from cinema to popular culture; and from politics to media. On the pages of *Şizofrenji*, which criticises and questions the practice of psychiatry from inside, and offers solutions at times, essential names of anti-psychiatry and the contemporary philosophy – Michel Foucault, R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari... were meeting with their readers. Not only critical pieces on psychiatry but also psychotherapy and psychoanalysis appeared in the magazine. The last sentence of the chapter titled “Prelude: After Artaud on Van Gogh” on Phil Brown’s *Toward a Marxist Psychology*⁷ in the second issue was becoming the motto of the magazine: “We are in suspicion, totally!”

All in all, *Şizofrenji* consisted of important discussions and clues about the social, political, and cultural axis in Turkey, beginning with the madness and the field of psychiatry. That’s why I think that *Şizofrenji* would be a significant discovery for STS researches as it is for the history of psychiatry and literature. Some “institutes” and “industries” that are criticised by the writers were: medicine, media, psychiatry, pharmaceutical industry, literature industry, football industry, and the music industry. Why *Şizofrenji* has closed in the end? Some people still have no answer to it. Besides, it has closed in its prime, but why? On the letter of farewell “It was a gripping story” by Fatih-Yağmur-Mehmet, from the last issue in April 1998, the founders of the magazine were saying that:⁸

Our argument is over now, that’s it. We’re not totally in suspicion, anymore. Now, we are sure. Our driving force for six years has changed recently. Since our suspicion has ended, we have lost our excitement to publish the magazine. We are not in suspicion anymore. *Şizofrenji* was a cry to get rid of the ambiguities at the time. We are seeing that human conditions like schizophrenia that are detained behind the walls six years ago, has overflowed beyond it, globalised, and everyone is going nuts now. That’s why people who are not stigmatised as schizophrenic deserve this stigma much more. Ambiguities are withdrawn now. We know that everything is going to be worse twenty years later. And, we are astonished by fools who talk about the age of technology, communications revolution, information society, and the new age... [...] Yes, a new *Şizofrenji* can be possible in the future, but only if we believe in

something else truly, and wholeheartedly. Only then, we would carry the magazines to the bookshops again, saying “last one, last two...”

Some legends are like that; they walk away all of a sudden, leaving big questions, hopes, and doubts behind.

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- [2] Erik Mortenson and Rafet Karaoğlu, “Diagnosing the National Neurosis: The Underground Journal *Şizofreni* and Its Critique of 1990s Turkish Society”, *Turkish Studies*, 2015(16/1): 20–35.
- [3] This comment by one of the readers of *Şizofreni* is quoted on the letter of farewell in the last issue.
- [4] Fatih Artvinli, “More than a Disease: The History of General Paralysis of the Insane in Turkey”, *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, Vol.23, Number: 2, April-June 2014: 127-139.
- [5] Three supplementary issues of *Şizofreni* were titled humorously with a pun on the word ‘ek’ (supplement): *Bebek* (Baby), *Kek* (Cake) ve *Leylek* (Stork).
- [6] R.G.Ö., “Şizofreni”, *Şizofreni*, February, 1998, p. 9.
- [7] Phil Brown, *Toward a Marxist Psychology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974)
- [8] Fatih Altınöz, Mehmet Şenol and Yağmur Taylan, “Sürükleyici Bir Hikâyeydi” [It was a Gripping Story], *Şizofreni*, April, 1998, p. 1-4.