

STS Talks - Interview with Z. Umut Türem

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IstanbuLab invited Associate Professor Z. Umut Türem from Boğaziçi University to moderate Professor Kaushik Sunder Rajan's talk – “Judicialized health, the spirit of constitutionalism, and politics of labor in South Africa”^{} – given as part of the STS Talks events series in April 2019.¹ For the exhibit “[Innovating STS in Turkey](#),” Duygu Kaşdoğan asked a couple of questions to Türem to learn more about his experiences in engaging with STS during this event.*

^{*}The first event of 2019 STS Talks opens a conversation over the judicialization of health in South Africa. The “judicialization of health”, as conceptually developed by Joao Biehl and Adriana Petryna, speaks to ways in which demands concerning health have been made through the law, especially in global Southern contexts. In this talk, Sunder Rajan will discuss how judicial interventions in such cases are animated by creative interpretations of foundational constitutional principles.

Sunder Rajan shows that judicial interventions speak to universalizing imaginaries of human rights that are intimately connected to postcolonial imaginaries of post-apartheid democracy. At the same time, according to Sunder Rajan, they are forced to respond to the specific histories and presents of carceral and extractive regimes of neoliberal governance. In what ways do these political claims articulate with, enable or constrain the South African constitutional imagination of health as a human right? Can a biomedicalized and constitutionally mediated class action envisage new modalities of collective struggle?

DK: Would you talk a bit about your experience in moderating a talk given by an STS scholar? Before this event, did you have any engagement with STS? Whether and how did this talk overlap your own research interests?

UT: Moderating an STS talk was a very positive experience for me. It was full of new insights, thought provoking, and quite enjoyable overall. The talk was given by Kaushik Sunder Rajan on his upcoming (and yet to be researched) project focusing on judicialization of health in South Africa. Sunder Rajan discussed whether or how law can be mobilized to achieve justice for the victims of AIDS or silicosis -classes, in other words, of people who suffer and perish in the hands of the broad regimes of injustice animated by apartheid and extractive capitalism.

¹ <https://stsistanbul.org/events/muhabbet2019/>

That the talk was given by a prominent scholar in the “field” and that it was superbly interesting were surely among the reasons for why I enjoyed the event greatly. As importantly though, the 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. (*As a matter of fact, my brief engagement with the STS goes back to my graduate school days when we frequently discussed whether we should call what we do “inter”, “trans” or “post” disciplinary work. STS always figured strongly in these intellectual debates.*) The talk being as much a Socio Legal Studies talk as it was an STS lecture thus made it truly rewarding for me.

In his presentation, Sunder Rajan took us on a series of masterful excursions into these open fields. “Justice” appeared to be the guiding theme in charting these otherwise vast territories of knowledge. In the end, I believe people in the audience, myself certainly included, left the talk on a highly positive note, with a flurry of ideas in their minds as to how biomedical and legal phenomena could be understood and constructed to reach socially progressive ends. Moderating such a talk that brought together a top notch academic research and a substantial interest in justice on the ground was a remarkable experience.

Was there anything new, inspiring, or innovating for you in moderating this STS talk?

On one level, the event followed a traditional academic talk format: First the event was started by the host/curator of the speaker series and the speaker was introduced immediately afterwards; the main talk itself was given later, followed by the discussion by the moderator; and finally a Q & A took place followed by the applause and all the thanks. 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.

Would you also tell us a bit about your observations as a moderator regarding the engagement of the audience with the talk? As far as you can recall, what were the main topics that came to the fore during the Q&A part of the event?

Initially, the audience was a bit slow to chime in. Perhaps they had to wait a brief while to digest the wealth of information and perspectives they had heard during the talk. Regardless, once the awkward silence was over, there was a flurry of comments, questions and suggestions. I remember three particular avenues of inquiry informing the comments and questions: First, silicosis related deaths were discussed to a considerable extent. These deaths have also been somewhat common in Turkey particularly among the workers who worked in sandblasting denim jeans, so comparisons and contrasts were discussed. Second, and by all means related, connections between capitalism and biomedicalized injuries and deaths were discussed. This discussion was inspired and shaped to some degree by the speaker's earlier work, "Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life". Finally, (the quest for) justice was there all along, like a blanket enveloping all the discussion. More specifically, potentials and likely pitfalls of progressive (legal) activism was discussed. Overall, once the pace of Q&A was set, almost a full hour went by constant dialogue, reflection and productive exchange.

I need to add one more striking feature of the Q&A: The richness of the comments and questions were perfectly matched by the attentiveness of the speaker. Unlike in some (many?) exchanges between speakers from the global northern universities and audience from the global south, Sunder Rajan took great pains to engage with the comments and questions. Given that his project is in its infancy, some of the themes in the discussion would possibly find their ways into the work to come. This certainly says something about how well an academic citizen Sunder Rajan is, but it also shows how deep and prolific the discussion has been!

Overall, how would you evaluate this event series organized by IstanbulLab with the aim to engage with audience beyond the university while spreading STS topics, concepts and discussions in Turkey?

I have been to two other events in the series, besides the one I moderated. Based on my admittedly limited observations, it appears that both in terms of form and in terms of content the series is highly successful and inspiring. Even though I am not totally at home with the concept “spread”, I think this format and the series at large have the potential to open up a space of discussion and learning for the key questions clustered around science and technology today. The topics chosen for discussion, i.e. the “content” appear rather interesting and they can almost naturally invite many participants. Ranging from the use of artificial intelligence in law to questions of machine human interaction in the cases of persons with disabilities, the chosen topics are highly interesting not just for the academic audience but also for the “slightly curious individual”.

To the extent that it can be distinguished from content, the “form” aspect (i.e. the venue, style of talks, etc.) is even more interesting and inspiring for me. In the events I participated, the speakers were very knowledgeable yet humble, and the style of the talks was closer to exploration than out right teaching or informing. In constructing such a frame, the curators of the series appear to have generated a genuine environment of dialogue and exchange, particularly as the speakers appear willing to hear and sincerely engage with questions and comments. A really diverse group of people from various walks of life comes to the events. They are introduced to the topics and discussions in the STS paradigm without being talked down. Moreover, the audience participates in the discussion in meaningful ways. Such posture is very inspiring as to how knowledge is produced and communicated. So all in all, I feel the IstanbulLab has created a wonderful chemistry of issues, speakers and audience.