Media Respresentations
T. DENIZ ERKMEN

Construction of Satanism
in Turkish Secularist and Islamist Newspapers

On 22 September 1999 the dead body of an 18-year-old girl was found in a cemetery in Istanbul, Turkey. Massive media coverage was launched when the police discovered that she had been killed by two young men and a young woman, who, claiming to be Satanists, testified that one of them had orders from Satan to perform the sacrifice. When the public prosecutor used the description of Satanism in the formal charges brought against the accused, Satanism entered the legal documents as a new crime for the first time in Turkish legal history. The three perpetrators were judged guilty of murder and were sentenced to a total of 25 years in prison.

Although since the youths were imprisoned media interest in Satanism has died down, all newspapers had covered the issue extensively in the period leading up to and including their trial. There were conferences, talk shows and heated debates on various television channels where important public figures voiced their opinions on the issue. The police declared Satanism an organized terrorist group and began arresting youths who were considered to be connected. Places suspected of being hangouts of Satanists were raided, and bars and clubs accused of being frequented by adherents to the movement were shut down.

This new, marginal issue of Satanism was appropriated by different sectors of Turkish society and placed into existing matrices. However, before commencing with the discussion, the following brief overview of constructionist theories offers useful tools for understanding the Satanic hype.

Social problems are, according to constructionists, socially constructed. Instead of concentrating on the analysis of actual practitioners as was done in early sociological literature, constructionists argued that there was no significant Satanist danger, although it has been defined as a social problem. Concentrating on the portrayal and representation of Satanism, they underlined social mechanisms such as 'scapegoating' and stereotyping in public responses to Satanism. Accordingly, the forming of a stereotype involves the creation of a 'reverse mirror image of one's society' in which the 'evil enemy' is depicted as having all those unflattering qualities that contrast with the virtues of that society. This activity aims at restoring an idealized society and serves the function of 'unifying the conflicting elements within a society, by imposing unity on something that is fragmented' (Jeffrey S. Victor: *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Press, 1993, p.41). It enables rising collective anxiety to be released, especially in times of increased tension.

If the 'scapegoating' is about constructing an ideal society, is it possible to find shared ideals between Islamic and secular groups in Turkey? Indeed, there is a unifying activity occurring as a result of the shared patriarchal norms of both groups.*

Reading the newspapers

Both liberal/secular and Islamic newspapers depict a Satanist stereotype and tell us that the Satanists can be detected by their physical appearance and behaviour. For instance, *Milliyet* states that Satanists 'mostly come from richer families and live in better neighbourhoods of the cities. They are interested in perverse music types such as heavy metal and black metal. They have long hair and they wear black t-shirts with Satan and skull prints on them. They look unkempt and grungy. [Satanism] is com-

mon among youths between the ages of 14 and 25' (22 September 1999).

This basic stereotype of the Satanist as being young, long haired, clad in black with tattoos and earrings, looking untidy and listening to 'perverse' music is repeated over and over in all the papers – always with some mention of alcohol, drugs, bars, clubs and nightlife. Names of places that they frequent and magazines they read are also mentioned. Along with these descriptions are vivid accounts of what they do, which being generally very much against legal and ethical conventions of Turkish society, help to define the group as a social problem. These accounts are similar in both groups of papers. Accordingly, the Satanists 'worship Satan and conduct rituals in which they sacrifice virgins. They drink animal blood, […] they conduct activities that go beyond all borders, and they carry out horrifying murders […]' (*Zaman*, 22 September 1999). 'They sacrifice their own children, have sex with a newly killed corpse, kill their father and mutilate his body without showing any signs of guilty conscience, use young women maliciously to drink their blood and eat their internal organs. […] They enter into cemeteries at night, choose a girl among themselves, cut her up with a knife, smear her with animal blood and satisfy the Satan by having intercourse with the mutilated girl. They are against all religions and holy books' (*Milliyet*, 22 September 1999).

As the Satanists begin to be characterized as 'sick', 'perverted', 'psychologically unbalanced', and 'lunatic', or as 'alienated', 'detached' and 'lost', interpretations and moral judgements about their existence and solutions for preventing them come to the fore. The accounts of both sides emphasize the moral void of the youth that leads to a search for identity. However, a discrepancy emerges between the secular and Islamist newspapers in their primary line of argumentation. The majority of comments in the Islamist newspapers explain the situation not as a problem with the youth, but with society and social life in general. The youth is only one part of the whole in which the problem is manifested. According to those accounts, Turkish social life is becoming alienated from its traditional cultural roots, moral tradition and national/traditional values (*Yeni Safak*, 26 and 27 September 1999). There is no longer a moral unity, national culture or totality within Turkish society (*Milli Gazete*, 24 September 1999). All this is due to the severance of the nation from religion. Once religion, which is 'the most important factor in shaping a society's moral values', is removed, the ensuing moral void in society leaves the youth prey to all kinds of marginal and perverse beliefs (Ibid.). It is the system that pushes the youth to where they end up, by not teaching them their religion properly, closing down the schools that teach religion, and replacing them with 'materialist' education (Ibid., 25 and 26 Sep-

tember 1999). The youth, with proper Islamic culture, would not 'use drugs, murder, [or] drink blood' (Ibid., 24 September 1999). Some of these arguments have a harsh, even accusing tone towards the secularists for being the cause.

Secularist newspapers, on the other hand, picture the problem more as one related to adolescence, in which the identity-searching youth somehow fall in to the hands of those waiting to impart their dangerous beliefs. Not only 'mystic' groups like that of the Satanists, but 'other materialist totalitarian groups' can also captivate the youth by offering them a sense of belonging and identity (*Milliyet*, 22 September 1999). This crisis of identity is emerging from a system that lacks meaning and is related to the traumas of modernization. Hence, the cause is not located in Turkey in another group, but is rather a global issue of modernity. The solution also comes from the globe, especially the West. It has been indicated that Western societies encourage healthy communities and voluntary organizations against illnesses such as these, thus implying that Turkey should do the same.

Points of convergence

The above findings reveal that even though both liberal/secular and Islamist newspapers present Satanism as a 'belief system', there is never an indication that people can actually choose to believe in it. The Satanists are depicted as sick, atomized, deviant or part of a terrorist group. They are deceived, seized and captivated by dangerous forces or are coerced by the corrupt system into the situation in which they find themselves.

Both secularists and Islamists have made attempts to control the youth – which has become an area of contestation, just as 'women' – since they are the perpetuators of society and symbols of its ideals. Although the Kemalist regime paid special attention to gender roles and gender equality, it did not change the patriarchal order but rather maintained the basic cultural conservatism of gender relations. These patriarchal norms of morality are, however, not only hierarchical in terms of gender but also in terms of age. Both Islamists and secularists share this patriarchal norm regarding the role and position of the youth. They both see young people not as responsible individuals, but as a group to be shaped for the future. They postpone the present – a situation in which young individuals are not supposed to participate or to speak up, but need to be educated, follow rules, obey, and only realize themselves in the future. Both groups also underline values such as obedience, education, loyalty, devoutness, seriousness, decency, and modesty in outlook and lifestyles – and not creativity, individual choice or criticism. While secularists aspire to westernization and modernization, they nevertheless place limits on these. One has

to be modest; if not, one falls into decadency. Thus, both groups agree on setting boundaries on excessive individualization.

Despite Islamists' and secularists' seemingly different reasons for the existence of Satanists, there is a unifying activity: both groups conjoin in not accepting a different mode of living, a different type of youth. They both exclude those who do not fit the patriarchal norms. Furthermore, in both instances, the constructed stereotype is vague and thus potentially targets anyone who is part of a larger hard rock/heavy metal subculture.

Youth subcultures represent symbolic violations of social order and can be seen as provoking the dominant culture. Groups differentiate themselves through constructing unique styles that define an identity and offer particularity. They are collective articulations of a cultural critique that establishes and maintains a new self-concept and symbolically challenges the dominant culture's value system.

In accordance with constructionist explanations of Satanic hype, it can be seen that in the context of growing tension between Islamists and secularists a trigger event – the murder story – leads to an explosion in one of the areas of contestation in Turkish society, revealing dissatisfaction with the moral order. Nonetheless, the two groups are united in their establishing of an enemy that incarnates all the negative virtues to which both aim to put an end. By overreacting and depicting this subculture's members as deviants or terrorists, both sides downplay the possibility that Satanism may be presenting a social critique in the form of symbolic violations of social order. However, in both groups of newspapers as well as in the accounts in this article, what is lacking is the voice of the Satanists, both those who call themselves such and those who are simply perceived as such. Without this, our understanding of the dynamics of this subculture and whether it presents a social critique is limited and undoubtedly deserves greater attention.

T. Deniz Erkmen is a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA.
E-mail: erkmend@umich.edu