



THE HUMAN ECOLOGY OF A FORMER STATE-OWNED-ENTERPRISE IN WESTERN ANATOLIA

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Abstract:

This article is basically the retrospective investigation of a Turkish State-owned pulp-and-paper plant, in the time interval of 1979-1981. At the time, the mixed economy understanding prevailing, many industrial installations were operated by the government in Turkey. Along the course of privatizations the vast majority of such institutions have changed hands and the few remaining ones are also on the same way.

Keywords:

Human ecology, plant, engineer, industry, community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The former SEKA (pulp-and-paper works) was one of the important official industrial enterprises in possession of half a dozen plants spread out around the Anatolian soil. As a chemical engineer, I, for a time period, happened to be part of the work force of that particular organization; and my evaluations years later gives me a “bird’s view”, enabling a much more objective and complete analysis than what I could have done on the spot at the time.

The particular plant was a new link to the existing chain. It had just been assembled by an international consortium and the immense social changes caused in the region thanks to this plant were accordingly more visible. Now; the approach to the topic is from the point of view of human ecology.

In the sociological sense, ecology deals with people’s interrelations with their natural and social surroundings. A village’s ecological pattern, for that matter, is far different from that of an urban center, in the sense of being less complicated and less heterogeneous (paraphrased from Stewart and Glynn 1985: 295).

Ecology involves “the special distributions of social and cultural traits or complexes, from which phenomena arise and change as the result of processes of both social and ecological interaction” (Fairchild 1961: 281-282). If the word ‘ecology’ is a synonym with ‘geographical environment’; social ecology also comprises distribution and composition of groups fighting with the nature as



well as their own networks and concepts stemming from the related habitats (paraphrased from Mitchell 1979: 61).

We also encounter an investigation of Human Ecology in an article by Wirth (1969: 171-172) in the following manner, as paraphrased briefly: According to Robert E. Park; Human Ecology is a basic discipline like Social Psychology to look at the social life. It has a kinship with Geography and Biology. Nevertheless, it emphasizes the relationship of man to man in his habitat more than the relationship of man to his habitat. Unlike animals and plants; human beings manage most of the design of their own surroundings, themselves. Man, with his great power of mobility and other possibilities of controls and organization, is only more loosely connected to nature. All those reasons render Human Ecology more complicated than the ecologies of other beings.

2. THE PLANT'S LOCATION AND PECULIARITIES

SEKA-Çay Installations were located nearby the small town of Çay, a county of the western Anatolian province of Afyon. No other major industrial works had been constructed in the immediate surroundings before. The chemical plant began to operate in 1979. Cellulose, the main material for paper, was obtained from chips of reeds from a nearby lake as well as straw residues of wheat harvests. Cellulose was the final product in the form of light gray, soft, rectangular large sheets. In other plants of SEKA it got mixed with other additives to produce the actual usable paper.

The plant's structure branched into two: Administrative and technical divisions. Technical units comprised operation, maintenance, energy-provision and environmental protection, the last unit being one of the earliest exemplary ones in that respect in the entire country at that date. The hierarchy of the technical staff in descending order was plant manager, technical director, chief engineers, engineers, technicians, foreman, expert workers, plain workers. Administrative units under the administrative director comprised, the chiefs of social affairs, personnel management (including safety measures), transportation, finances and communications, all seated in the main building separate from the further-away operation field.

The company houses (or lodgings) consisted of 70-m²-sized centrally heated apartment buildings, which went to engineers and officials mostly. Chiefs had somewhat larger houses (80 m²) reserved for them. The two vice-directors had even larger special apartments. The plant manager had a furnished suit and an official car. Bachelors lived in separate quarters, a hostel-like building with several rooms.

White collars and blue collars had their respective mess halls (refectories) for meals. The social club had a saloon suitable for card or chess or backgammon playing and TV watching.

There were two canteens which resembled the former famous American department stores. They used to sell food and drinks, clothing, toys, house commodities and even some furniture. A lot of



personnel commuted to work from the two nearby villages, Karacaören and Akkonak, the town of Çay and the city of Afyon by company-hired civilian buses.

3. THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REGION

The prominent contribution was providing salaried jobs to nearly a thousand people. Indeed; just as Haveman & Cohen put it (1994: 104-111); new installations mean new jobs, population mobility and shifts. Vacancies also get filled by those coming from other places, since new places initially lack all man power.

Moreover; the plant indirectly compelled commerce and services (white goods, house renting, baby-sitters, maids) all around. At the time few people had their own cars. The plant was far from the town of Çay. Cab-drivers were benefiting from the circumstances, a lot. The distance between the town and the plant cost 175 liras, while the starting salary for a new engineer was seven thousand liras. The proportion was roughly one to forty! (The location was away from the routes of passenger buses. Some attributed the inconvenient choice of location to political considerations).



Figure 1. Two engineers heading for work (illustration by the author — S.Ç.)

A chief engineer's wife (herself an engineer) once told her friends the following: "When we first arrived I wanted to buy beefsteak at a butcher down town. He said he sold minced meat and cubed meat but no steak. Can you imagine? Until three years ago people here around did not even know what steak is!"



The social facilities (heated company house, lunch and evening meals at the club) and the feeling of loneliness* at far-flung distances urged people to fetch friends and relatives from far-away locations and the bus companies down town did not worry about filling with passengers.

“Health-service-buying customers” were many of the community folks for private doctors in fairly nearby *Akşehir* (where all specialists were available, which even many provinces lacked in those days). Pediatricians and gynecologists were the most searched ones. A technician once said: “We again went to the gynecologist again. A piece of the placenta was forgotten in my wife’s uterus after the birth of the baby. The doctor shook my wallet off at the end of the month, just before the salary!” Here one could talk about the respectively well-to-do financial situation and the health consciousness of the plant community due to higher socio-cultural level. One administrative chief once made a humorous comment: “The mosquitoes keep irritating us. I notice that the mosquito clouds do not go into the two nearby villages. After all, they know that a well-fed community with higher-quality-blood live up here”.

It was told that a historical artifact fraudulence was experienced during the assembly of the plant by the consortium. A crafty man from the town discovered the interest of some foreign experts in ancient relics. He produced tiny statues from plaster of Paris, artificially-aged them by soaking into carbonated drinks and rubbing with earth and then sold them at high prices. The Prosecutor thought it was smuggling of artifacts but it turned out as forgery. In other words, even such an opportunity was utilized by somebody.

4. SOCIAL PROBLEMS DUE TO A LACK OF PREVIOUS URBAN AND INDUSTRY CULTURE

The plant being an unprecedented one, the crew were basically very young and inexperienced in their jobs. The rural values and beliefs were also prevalent as an urban culture had not been fully absorbed around yet. This peculiarity generated many problematic situations.

For instance; work-ethos was in existence among the service staff (waiters, doormen, janitors). In actuality such occupations were lighter and more attractive, as far as face value of the job went. Gaining the same amounts of money in operation circumstances in production divisions (noise, heat, chemical odors, caustic liquids on the ground tearing into leather shoes and the obligation to carry uncomfortable plastic boots) was much harder but also much more “respectable”. As Nirun (1991: 188) puts it; the villager has pity for the city-dweller and despises him because he is working under the command of others. (Indeed, the typical peasant toils his own little acre of field and is his own master, after all).

*A mechanical engineer once observed that housewives were even lonelier in company houses and were accordingly in constant depression. He said that quarrels broke out because of trifles like dripping wet laundry from the upper balcony. The author



The waiters in the social club were under the effect of specially heavy inferiority complexes, in this respect. As a reaction; they were especially wise in handling the other service-seekers as scapegoats (Sündenböcke, bouc emissaries): Men not on the payroll of the official company but working for the contractors —many auxiliary installations like incinerators or special boilers were yet incomplete and people from bidding firms like Alarko or Sungurlar were coming and going.

It was safer for them to target their resentment against those other employees. A waiter could give the following wily answer to a guest who ordered honey at the breakfast “sir, you might as well eat honey tomorrow morning, now we are almost closing”. They were deliberately delaying grilled-meat orders. On one occasion, a middle-aged architect (in charge of covering an open tower-like unit, the huge “cooking” vessel, with corrugated plastic sheets) got sick of waiting; he tore the order-bill into pieces and left the restaurant, scolding the waiter with the following wording: “if you feel shame, then you do not execute this job! Simple as that!” This was an incident with some repercussions. The word went that chief of Social Affairs reprimanded the involved personnel and warned them to pull themselves together.

In operation circumstances as well, some mild disobedience in successive levels of hierarchy was discernable, which became more conspicuous if comparisons were made with elsewhere.

Technology may be accepted as a factor taking place at the base of urbanization, stratification, specialization and other social changes (Kurtkan 1976: 286). People come into organizations along with their cultural settings. This cultural structure, formed from child ages onwards, invariably affects the organizational behavior development. It is not possible to get rid of those vestiges [in the short run] (Başaran 1991: 241). In order to institutionalize the order-issuing authority; social norms and culture should support the bossiness with compliance and moreover transmit this affirmation to the next generations (paraphrased from Blau 1964: 211).

People who could not come up with such scientific explanations but who were quite aware of the recalcitrant ambiance from the rank and file and successive levels upwards; were ascribing the reasons to other factors. For instance, a technician who had previously worked for Kütahya Artificial Fertilizer Factory —it also got into private hands in 1990s— labeled the local people of that city there as mild and conforming while he esteemed the local people here in this region (his own region) as being headstrong!

But the real reason was different: Kütahya Artificial Fertilizer Factory had been established by the Germans way back in 1957. This plant had long settled down with all its aspects, including an industrial organization-climate. I had been a summer trainer there before my graduation. A rigid discipline was obvious all over the place. One morning the white-haired technical director encountered two late-comers at the entrance gate. They were young engineers with hangovers from last night’s drinking session down town.



The technical director put his hands around the two sides of his waist-belt —a posture representing some challenge in the body language in Turkish culture — and spoke up: “What laziness! What irresponsibility! It is not so easy to find jobs in our country, nowadays and I, I may consider firing you two!” This was a bluff since engineers were government officials, who could not technically be dismissed from their jobs by the word of mouth of the Ministry of Technology himself, let alone a tiny technical director. But it was a hard blow to one’s professional pride and caused a collapse of morale. In any case; this could not be done by the homologue of the same position in SEKA’s new branch in Çay district. (It is interesting to note that this particular technical director of fertilizers, a handsome man resembling late John F. Kennedy in his facial features, had been promoted to full directorship in Gemlik, at a newly-established branch of the fertilizer-enterprise. Allegedly, he could not find the properly respectful social atmosphere and returned back to the second-man position in Kütahya, willingly).

5. SHEER TECHNICAL PROBLEMS AS WELL AS SOCIAL-ORIGINATED TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

The general lack of experience of the personnel caused a lot of technical deficiencies also. As a technician put it bitterly “those men used to be farmers and shepherds”. Few qualified people who had industrial experience in self-exile beforehand were really a precious elite. They were happy to have a chance to find similar positions at familiar ground now. They were extra happy because of the prestige they enjoyed from the higher authority.

Another constant problem was the ongoing conflict between the operational staff (chemical engineers and their subordinates) and the maintenance crew (mechanical or electrical engineers and their subordinates)*. When something went wrong and interrupted the production, the former naturally fetched the latter to fix the trouble. Now; the latter got offended as if they were commended by the former. On the other hand; the former did not resort to proper polite and tactful expressions in wording-style and sounded somewhat blunt. Those factors aggravated the normally-probable potentials of conflict. Indeed; within the same organization; sections with different duties, authorities and responsibilities might come into conflict with one another; despite their togetherness initially meant for the common functions of the entire organization (Eren 1993: 371).

The lack of a proper urban culture can be seen in the following case history. In one apartment building among the lodgings (company houses) a heating problem emerged. Craftsmen checked the sanitary system and could not locate a defect. Then one midnight one of the residents witnessed that another resident went to the basement, loosened the valve of a radiator-honeycomb and pilfered some hot water into a bucket.

* A couple of civil engineers had really passive positions. One agricultural engineer played the expert role in purchasing the reeds and straw as raw materials. He wanted the job in order to be near his home-town. He could not affect airs like the other engineers, at all. In fact, he was dumped into a crowded office along with some other white-collars, away from the field. In his grunting mood, he used to mention his glory days in Soil-Works as a real agricultural engineer, constructing irrigation channels and artificial ponds, gaining respect from farmers. The author



Another problem arising from the short history of the plant was the “rebel” or even “anarchist” stigmas foreseen by some people for ringleaders concerned with extra indemnity compensation for gas and dust. Their research into the matter at the official gazettes and their reclaims for the involved employees was merely a righteous sensitivity for legitimate rights.

6. TECHNICAL STAFF VERSUS THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Another discernible conflict was the general friction between the technical and administrative personnel, culminating between engineers and higher-educated white-collars. In the fertilizers, the superiority of the technical party had been tested and confirmed, too, in a sense. Here; the competition was yet in process.

From time to time the technical director of another older branch at *Aksu-Giresun* would pay a visit, as an official advisor. He was a well-spoken, witty man despite his somewhat young age for his position —even within the official bureaucracy; the characteristically rigid rules can be flexed for faster promotions, as exceptions— and liked the company of younger fellow-engineers in the social building after work hours.

He was anxious to build them up when it came to the technical versus administrative rivalry. Once he gave an example from his own plant: “Last month, our chief accountant caused some trouble to one of my engineers, regarding the reimbursement of the fellow’s newly-bought eyeglasses. I automatically interfered. I said to this accounted ‘go f*ck yourself!’ and the guy could hardly find the way to his office, his own shelter in the administrative headquarters!”

7. THE ISSUE OF STATUS AND THE ESTEEMED STANDING OF THE ENGINEER

The status-consciousness was an important issue, which was partly dealt with in the subtitle about the lack of an urban culture. The ambiance of the plant somehow escalated the greed for higher post, as if the reward for this privation in this far-flung corner could only be neutralized in the future by appropriation of a higher position and eventually moving to another branch (*İzmit, Dalaman, Balıkesir, Silifke, Giresun-Aksu*, or even *Çaycuma-Zonguldak*; all considered better places; coastal settlements, in any case) with that new position (In government jobs any promotion is permanent vested-gain for the individual, who, if moved elsewhere, is sure to get an equivalent post). Some were indulging into intense lobbying activities to obtain a chief’s position.

At the time; just before the infamous military coup; which, among other things would also harness labor union activities and demands, for years to come; the wages for government-workers were sailing at the peak, thanks to regular collective bargains. Some workers were gaining up to two or three times as engineers. (The engineers, considered government officials, had no unions just like other white-collar state *fonctionnaires*).



Some workers were doing overtime even though such overtime was not needed for the plant's own sake. But, overtime brought extra high wages immediately. (The bulky, clumsy, ungainly trait of government industry in general is visible in the context of this example). The engineer in charge was usually shy to veto such an unnecessary overtime; he invariably confirmed the form submitted to his desk.

Still; the perceived prestige of any blue collar was much lower than that of a white-collar office-bearer or *fonctionnaire*. This was just a deep rooted reflection of cultural values in general* as well as the traditional despising of work under others' command in specific.

One can deem status as the superiority or inferiority location related to a role as perceived by a group. This situation places the status right amid a hierarchical standing to be evaluated as high or low (Sencer with reference to Lundbreg, Schrag & Larsen 1964-1966: 129).

On one occasion, a worker in the maintenance unit was about to ask the hand of a village girl in marriage. He presented himself as a white-collared official of the plant to the bridal family. He later confessed it in a conversation session to other fellow-employees. A man at a certain age disapprovingly but jokingly criticized this old trick, addressing to the engineers: "Many a rural girl used to fall victim to this treacherous ways. She thought she married a doctor while in actuality the husband was a health official, for instance".

Within the plant, engineers enjoyed the highest professional prestige and job satisfaction. One day a somewhat senior engineer offered to take a new-engineer to the city of Afyon in a borrowed car, to take some city air. The new graduate, a local person of the region, said that he did not have his engineering identification card with him at the moment. The other replied him not to worry; he added that he did not even have his driving license with him at the moment. The young one accepted the offer reluctantly and while getting into the car, feigning to be a news-speaker, he resorted: "Now the local news: Yesterday two lunatics claiming to be engineers at the pulp-and-paper industry, were captured by the gendarmes, in a car".

The translator was a Teacher-Training-Institute graduate. (Other white collars with similar education were also employed in other positions). Stemming from a distinguished family, he rejected an English teacher's humble salary and chose to work here. Since the official-status salary was similarly low here in the plant (except for fringe benefits), a wise and thoroughly legal formula was worked out. The translator chose to be a contractual employee instead of a regular one, which made him a worker and not an official, in principle (despite the office-nature of the job).

* A white-collar office-bearing is associated with managing others and is traditionally high-esteemed, as the saying specifies: He who holds the stamp in his hand is the de facto-Prophet-Solomon. The author



In reality he only worked from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. But to enable the receipt of even better wages for this “highly-qualified intellectual laborer”; the administration allowed him to do overdue-work every single day, as a mere formality. So, instead of 4 p.m. (his real departure time and the closing down of all similar offices in the main building) he went to the tally-clerk’s cabin at midnight and printed his card.

He had abused another privilege, again within theoretically fully legal frameworks. A health report certified a delicate stomach. Accordingly; he obtained the worker meals’ value in cash, in lump sum, every month. Instead of eating at the laborers’ refectory in the company of “crude men”, he regularly dined at the officials’ refectory with pleasure.

One day an electrical engineer came up with the following ironic affirmation: “It is a horribly demeaning act for our respectable translator to go print cards at midnight. Last night I ran into him and said hello. He was just out of the tally-clerk’s cabin. The rascal gave me a resentful look and hardly snorted a reply!”

One day a chemical engineer wanted to have alcohol at dinner at the social club in a week night. This was against the rules. Alcohol could be served at weekend only. When the debate lengthened the chief of social affairs appeared in person. His first sentence was: “Mister, we had countless numbers of other engineers just like you, in this place!”

It was like a convention among engineers to wear jean-pants, military boots, parkas and to carry rucksacks. Those objects were like confirmed signs, emphasizing the work out there in the field, for making tangible produce. A few lycée students were emulating them in that respect. (The personnel being relatively young, few families had children at high-school age. The vast majority of the community children were at the age of junior high-school and below).

After all; as Tezcan (1993: 112) puts it; fashion is a mass phenomenon with a marked place in our daily lives. It is a collective behavior involving certain patterns. It is seen as means of resembling upper categories. Moreover; as Secord & Backmann specify (1974: 476) which behavior will be taken as a model depends on its availability, frequency, functionality, attractiveness and conspicuousness.

When a child was asked the cliché question about what he / she will become when he / she grows up; the most common reply was an engineer’s profession. As London (1978: 489) says; the first and probably the strongest base of choosing a profession is related to imitating adult roles. The children observe what the grown-ups do. They want to be like those whom they like and admire. They think about assuming the same roles with them.

In his Economics for Engineers class, late professor Demir Demirgil once emphasized the high popularity of low salaried petty official positions with respect to high-paying blue-collar positions, especially among polite urban families. An aged-old Istanbul folk-song is an eulogy of the traditional clerk with his dandy costume and starched shirt. The author



At the bachelors' living quarters the rooms were usually shared. It was only the engineers who had their own rooms by themselves. Friendship between a single female engineer and a single male engineer was also subjected to a much lighter form of social repression, with respect to other cases. A biologist from the purification unit, who had worked at the depths of Anatolia at an intermediary level before attending university and attaining graduation, made the comment: "If a mid-wife gets appointed to a small borough, the mischievous folk scrutinize every single move of the poor girl and at the smallest pretext they stigmatize her as being frivolous. On the other hand; a young female single doctor assigned to the same settlement could act ten times as freely and nobody would say a bad word about her easy manners, which are not even comparable with the midwife's strict manners". Status is an originator of prerogatives, it appears.

8. A PLANT WITH HIGH PRODUCTIVITY AND ALMOST NO DETRIMENT TO THE NATURE

The plant was a pioneer in physical, chemical and biological purification of wastes before dumping them onto the environment. Above all; relying on lake-reeds and especially straw as raw materials instead of devastating forests* was the greatest plus for that particular branch of SEKA, the state pulp-and-paper industry.

Karamik Lake nearby got spared from pollution thanks to those measures. The lake was a heaven for hunters of wild ducks and geese, at the time. Eber Lake, indirectly connected to Karamik and in the same water basin was also protected. The laboratory of the unit was following aqua life, including fresh water fish, shelled organisms and planktons. SEKA had signed a protocol with Hacettepe University for that purpose. One professor, one associate professor and one assistant from the Biology Department used to show up at the plant site and constitute good company for intellectual conservation sessions at the social club for some engineers, including the author of those lines. SEKA personnel under the coordination of the transport chief used to contribute to forestation of the region, as well.

*The immediate surroundings had few trees, let alone forests. A saying circulated that in former times great forests were present. Nearby Sultan mountains were also full of forests. All were destroyed by the army of Tamerlane after his victory over Sultan Bayezid The First (nicknamed The Thunderbolt) at the Battle of Ankara in 1402. At least it is a fact that warrior Tamerlane came to the surroundings of Akşehir: Bayezid died in Akşehir on March 8, 1403 in captivity. His corpse was transferred to Bursa. The Tartars ravaged almost the entire Anatolian territory and reached Smyrna (İzmir) which was in the hands of Rhodesian Knights (Lamauche 1934: 37). Trans. from French by the author

(In a recent live history program on TV, the etymology of the phrase "Smyrna of the infidels" was taken up and explained by Historian Erhan Afyoncu: At the time of Timurlane the upper İzmir, Kadifekale (Pagos), was in the hands of the Turkish principality, Aydinids; and the lower harbor- section belonged to the knights. This was the reason for the phrase. Tamerlane's Mongols captured the other section also. They had no marine forces. But, they first filled the sea strip with rocks and then attacked the knights). The author



In spite of good sheltering, heating, food and reasonable payment; the whole social life was focused on the social club, where conversation sessions were held (most of which included gossip potentially-irritating everyone at some point) and card games went on at full swing. At the time, the state-owned TV had only one black-and-white channel, which was providing another respite, beside book-reading.

9. AN ALL-PRESENT FEELING OF DEPRIVATION

Lack of proper transportation was the biggest problem. The blue-painted official bus of the factory would go to the town of Çay on Wednesday evenings, stay there for two hours and bring back the attending group. The same bus would do that visit to the city of Afyon every other weekend, also.

Many guests were using the metaphor of “modern prison” to describe the place to acquaintances in their letters (Automatic phones were not installed yet, either). An official from the liaison office in İzmir once prayed for us all, before his return: “May Allah Almighty increase your patience and endurance within these confined boundaries!”. The wife of the above-mentioned biologist, a primary-school teacher, once compared the plant site with formerly experienced forlorn corners of eastern Anatolia and deemed it worse than any of the eastern settlements.

10. CONCLUSION

(The would-be-privatized) Çay-Afyon branch of Turkish state-owned enterprise SEKA (pulp-and-paper industry) was basically a total institution due to its hard-to-access location and many company houses included within the plant site. Even though the vast majority of the lower ranked employees came from the surroundings, a considerable portion of the higher-educated ones, stemming from elsewhere, had arrived there for the sake of the offered lucrative jobs.

The assembly of the plant took a few years. In 1979 production commenced and a new socio-economical impetus came to the region. The novelty of the installations brought some social-dimensioned problems to cope with; while their repercussions onto technical aspects were unavoidable. The highest esteem meanwhile fell to the shares of engineers.

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