Preface

Growing up in a working-class neighborhood of Istanbul in the 1980s, I often heard stories about the socialist movement of the 1970s; about the strikes organized in the factories near us; and, just before the coup of 1980, about the clashes on our streets between revolutionaries and Turkish nationalists. These stories were told quietly and behind closed doors as tales from a very distant past, as if all the neighborhood workers who had organized mass strikes and factory occupations, taken part in demonstrations, and filled up the ranks of the revolutionary organizations had nothing to do with our current neighbors. Those must have been different people living in the neighborhood in the 1970s, I thought; they must all have moved away. As a child I could feel the fear in the air whenever adults would speak of those years. Later, when I became a teenager, I heard frequent minilectures from adults in the neighborhood about the dangers of politics. For them, even talk of politics could put one in danger—best stay clear of it altogether.

When in 1994 I began attending high school in another neighborhood, I was surprised to discover that there were people in Turkey who believed that the revolutionary struggle was still alive, and they considered themselves to be part of the struggle. These were my Alevi schoolmates and their university student sisters and brothers, from predominately Alevi-populated working-class neighborhoods. My friends described for me the barricades, the checkpoints, the house raids, and the armored military vehicles patrolling their neighborhoods. Listening to their stories, I understood that the urban experience in these areas was radically different from the one I had witnessed in my own predominantly Sunni Turkish-populated working-class neighborhood.

In the winter of 1995, a high school Alevi friend took me to her neighborhood. Like my own neighborhood, the streets were muddy, and the houses were either makeshift cement block shanties (*gecekondu*) or incomplete apartment buildings. The main difference was that in her neighborhood, every single wall was spray-painted with slogans: "Long live the united struggle of the Turkish and Kurdish peoples," "Long live the revolution and socialism," "The murderous state will pay the price," "The people's justice will call [the government] to account." My friend took me to a café where she hung out regularly with her friends. While drinking tea together that day, I listened to high school students debating the possible paths to revolution. In my subsequent visits to my friend's

neighborhood, I often found myself listening to and participating in heated conversations on the difference between democratic revolution and socialist revolution, the disputes between Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the possibility of the establishment of a free and socialist Kurdistan, and philosophical debates on Marxism, historical materialism, and dialectics. We were listening to popular Turkish and Kurdish revolutionary music bands of the time, such as Grup Yorum, Grup Kızılırmak, Grup Özgürlük Türküsü, or Koma Dengê Azadî, whose lyrics promised that the victory of the working classes and the Kurdish liberation was at hand. At the time, my Sunni Turk working-class peers were listening to apolitical American music from MTV—Vanilla Ice, Meat Loaf, New Kids on the Block—or to Turkish pop and sad Turkish *arabesk* songs that depicted the misery of life in working-class neighborhoods. Some were developing an interest in religion, others in drugs.

Although my high school friends and I were optimistic about the future in those years, the 1990s, like the present, were dark times in Turkey. Kidnappings of revolutionary leftist and pro-Kurdish activists, disappearances, torture, and deaths in custody were common both in Northern Kurdistan (also known as southeast Turkey) and Istanbul.[1] When we were still in high school, some of my friends were imprisoned, others were forced to leave the country, and many experienced firsthand various forms of police violence. Yet, such intimidating methods were not effective in suppressing the dissent. I remember how shocked and fearful I was in June 1995 when I learned that a number of my friends from high school had joined thousands of others at the funeral of Sibel Yalçın, an eighteen-year-old revolutionary militant killed by the police after taking part in an armed action that resulted in the killing of a policeman. I also cannot forget my shock that year when I saw hundreds of young people dancing and chanting *Rojbaş, gerîlla rojbaş* (Good days, guerrilla good days) in Kurmanji Kurdish, during a concert I attended with my high school friends at Abdi Ipekçi Sport Hall, a large Istanbul stadium near my own neighborhood. While the people in my neighborhood were afraid to discuss the old revolutionary days of the 1970s in public, thousands at that stadium that night were listening to dissident music bands and chanting their support for Kurdish guerrillas fighting against the Turkish state. The enormous gulf between the attitudes of the people in my neighborhood who, once upon a time had played an active role in the leftist working-class movement, and the Kurdish and Alevi working classes who filled that concert hall with exuberant revolutionary fervor was beyond my comprehension.

After my visits to my Alevi high school friend's neighborhood in the early to mid-1990s, the next time I went to another such neighborhood was in March 1998, when I went to the Gazi neighborhood to participate in an anniversary demonstration organized to protest the killings of twenty-two people by state security

forces three years earlier. A friend from Gazi told me that the entrance to the neighborhood would be closed during the day of the protest and that I should go there the night before the event. I remember asking myself, "How could the entrance to a neighborhood be closed? It's not as though it has gates." Following the suggestion of my friend, I went there the night before the protest and stayed with his family. I still remember the dinner conversation about what the police would do the next day. Listening to his family members talk about the police as a violent enemy ready to attack the people, I realized that the next day would be an exceptional one for me.

I will never forget what I saw when I stepped out of the house the next morning. Large numbers of masked policemen from special operation units were standing on the rooftops of the buildings, pointing their rifles downward toward the streets. Masked policemen with heavy weapons were standing at the street entrances. The presence of these faceless black figures told us that the only law in Gazi that day was the law of the Police—the untouchable, godlike side of the law that has the right to decide to kill or let live. I was full of fear and thought I might easily die that day. The police were there at that anniversary protest of the killing of Gazi residents to remind us that death was never far away; instead, it was an imminent possibility. I overheard that there had already been clashes between the police and people who had wanted to enter the neighborhood. Watching a military vehicle chasing a group of youth, I understood how the entrance of a neighborhood could be closed. I saw the gates of the neighborhood and witnessed its armed gatekeepers. I wanted to run away, to get out of the neighborhood as fast as I could. But there were thousands in the streets, walking calmly despite the threatening presence of the state security forces. I felt embarrassed by my fear.

Two years later, in 2000, I traveled to Mardin, a city in Northern Kurdistan, to conduct research for my bachelor's thesis in sociology. The entrances and exits to the Mardin streets inhabited by dispossessed Kurds were guarded by black-masked and armed policemen from the special operation units. I spent hours and days with Kurdish women talking about their lives and various forms of violence that they had experienced. Listening to the stories of these Kurdish women while those threating men were outside, I again felt both afraid and embarrassed by my fear. I remembered what I had witnessed in Gazi in 1998 and how I had felt there. I was convinced that the Turkish ruling elites were actively and relentlessly waging war against Turkey's dispossessed and racialized Alevi and Kurdish populations.

What I witnessed more than two decades ago in the Alevi working-class neighborhoods of Istanbul and in Northern Kurdistan has haunted me ever since. It is that story of the systematic police repression and fearless political resistance of Turkey's Alevis and Kurds that I now feel obliged to write.