

Interview with i-mihrak

Ivo Furman*

Ivo Furman: First, thank you very much for agreeing to answer my questions. We can perhaps separate my questions into two categories. The first category of questions will be about how the collective makes use of the Internet. For the second category, I have prepared some open-ended philosophical questions on the notion of culture jamming. But before we proceed, I also want to ask you a few straightforward questions.

Would it be possible for you to explain the origins of i-mihrak as an anarchist design collective? How long have you been working together? What are some the differences that you observe when you compare yourselves with other Marxist or communist organizations in Turkey?

i-mihrak: i-mihrak (written in small letters) was started off in the winter of 2006 by some independent minded individuals who were participating in an anarchist discussion / activist group. While discussing the possibilities of developing a creative form of activism, we decided to form a design team capable of hijacking popular, official, and traditional cultural

* Ivo Furman is a sociologist from Istanbul who is completing his PhD in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His research interests include the sociology of the Internet, critical Internet studies, digital culture, and Turkish cultural studies. His research has been supported by Goldsmiths College, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Goethe Institut in London and Berlin, the Central Research Fund, the British Sociological Association, the British Institute in Ankara (BIAA), Administratia Fondului Cultural National (AFCN), and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC).

codes in a scandalous manner. Since we were mainly concerned with national matters, we decided (prior to ‘others’ deciding to label us as such) to call our venture ‘iç-mihrak.’¹ Since none of us were professional artists or graphic designers, we started out by teaching ourselves how to use design software. Our first projects were ‘independent’ in that they were not designed for particular groups or specific requests. As time went by, we decided to work with groups and individuals who had no access to the means of designing their own propaganda. We offered them free, fast, and good quality designs. Afterwards, much like every other grass-root anarchist organisation, our collective, which was composed of quite heterogenous elements, broke apart and iç-mihrak remained in the hands of a few remaining enthusiasts.

What characterises the Marxist communist organizations in Turkey is their deep knowledge of ‘real politics’ (and their almost paranoid interest in conspiracy theories). We, on the other hand, have intentionally decided to remain ignorant about ‘real politics’ or representational politics conducted both within and outside of the parliament in Turkey. We knew that getting knowledgeable about pragmatic politics could eventually push some anarchists amongst us into becoming consultants for the AK Party government.²

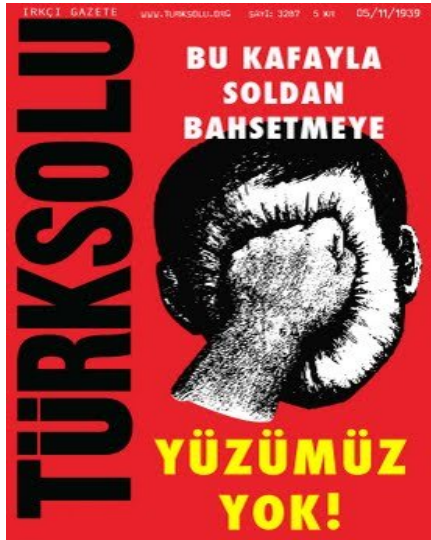
Marxist communist politics, with its legacy of ‘real communism’ and its experiments with social democracy in Europe, carries a heavy historical burden on its shoulders. The narrative is ‘the avant-garde saw the truths but the pragmatic politicians of the revolution did not found communism according to the book and as such failed to make the revolution permanent.’ This narrative is not that different from the belief that the version of

¹ **Translator’s note:** iç-mihrak can be translated into English as “internal traitor” or “the traitor within.”

² The Justice and Development Party (AK Parti in Turkish) is a center-right socially conservative political party in Turkey which has been ruling Turkey since a landslide electoral victory in 2002. The Party portrays itself as a pro-Western and pro-American political party that advocates neo-liberal economic and social policies based on Islamic values. Despite corruption allegations and a wave of mass protests against government policies in 2013 that have damaged the reputation of the party in the eyes of the Turkish public, the AK Parti is still the most popular and powerful political party in Turkey.

Islam lived out in Islamic countries is not really Islamic, that somewhere there is a more authentic Islam waiting to be found. The sort of reactions shown by the public to Marxist regimes is something inherently related to the nature of marxism, much like how particular forms of warfare conducted in the name Islam is something inherently related to the nature of Islam.

Against all of this, anarchism's realistic stance on the problems of political representation and its understanding of politics as an act of conscience even on the most individual level, was something that we always found desirable. As one can see from the linguistic firecrackers such as 'real socialism' or 'utopian anarchism,' the world is and was never that far away from Orwell's 1984.



Ivo Furman: In an interview you had with *Futuristika*, you described Turkish aesthetic sensibilities as a “forbidden love affair between the aesthetics of socialist realism and the aesthetics of kitsch advertising played out on the streets of the city” (iç-mihrak, 2008). I could not agree with you more. So then why do you think aesthetic design is so problematic in Turkey? What are some of the sources of inspiration for your own designs?

iç-mihrak: We are not going to criticize artistic movements such as socialist realism or critical realism. While combining realism with socialist culture in an academic context might have been a good idea back in the day, this fusion unfortunately has no relevance in our society today. Despite its irrelevance today, these old works can still be visually pleasing to the observer. Furthermore, social realist propaganda and capitalism's advertising industry share some similarities. Both aim to sell and both sell an IKEA-esque D.I.Y (Do It Yourself) commodity. Socialist realism's propaganda tradition is hyper-technological, the problem for socialist realism is obvious and the solution must follow a historical teleology. One can not find open-ended questions or answers in this universe. Just like a specific detergent brand that tries to market itself to us as the ultimate solution to killing bacteria in your household, every 'brand' of socialism tries to market itself to us as the best solution to class struggle through aesthetics. When we look at our first advertising stars in Turkey we find that they were the 'old rifles'³ prior to founding their advertising agencies after the 1980 *coup d'état*. One can discern here the discursive link between advertising and socialist realist propaganda.



Our sources of inspiration are a little more varied and this can sometimes be a handicap for us. The mouth of the monster for

³ **Translator's note:** 'old rifles' is Turkish slang referring to Leftist revolutionaries in Turkey during the 1970-80s.

us is what gives us the most information about the monster itself. So when looking for inspiration – especially when you are an anarchist – one must not be afraid of being in the mouth of the monster. Things such as popular culture, religious scriptures, or old Turkish nationalist literature, are not repulsive things one needs to avoid. On the contrary, they are what one needs to draw upon for inspiration. Classic and post-anarchist texts, Fanon, and more peripheral sources such as Caudwell, are also important for us in terms of inspiration. We also have the propaganda traditions of China, USSR, USA, and Nazi Germany to look into for inspiration. Additionally, science-fiction (not as escapism, but the sort that rivals some of the greatest literature ever written) and comics also inspire us. Finally, we really enjoy the city signage systems that attempt to totalize the realities of our urban lives.

Ivo Furman: As a collective, you give individuals and social groups crushed by consumer culture, state sanctioned violence, and repressive social traditions, an opportunity to express themselves visually. You describe yourselves as a free design service for anti-heirarchical and anti-authoritarian political / social activist groups. While being extremely heterogenous, Turkish society is also a place where the ‘other’ is never tolerated, and where everyone obeys the law of the masses. Perhaps the only characteristic that binds our society together is a collectively shared intolerance towards social ‘others.’ Every shift, each mutation in the social order, creates new social ‘others’ for the masses to hate and trample over. As the focus of hate shifts, the former ‘others’ are integrated into the totalitarian mentality of the masses. In this context, as an anarchist design collective, how do you define the terrain of your struggle? Is it possible to create lasting solidarity in a situation in which the rules of the game constantly change?

İç-mihrak: For us, political forms can be divided into two categories: statist and non-statist. Parliamentary democracy, fascism, socialism, monarchy, and constitutional monarchy are some examples of statist political forms. The commonality between all these political forms is that they represent the masses on a narrow basis of representation. Almost all of these forms depend on a principle of homogeneity (imagined, enforced, and produced) that creates both a ‘population’ and a social ‘other,’ both which are regulated through the state’s

monopoly on violence. Stateless political forms do not carry any of the aforementioned characteristics. So in fact, the myth that modern politics is the secularization of religious or divine rule is partially true; however, the process of secularization always remains partial and incomplete. We agree with your comment that 'every shift, each mutation in the social order creates new social 'others' for the masses to hate and trample over' - but with a slight change to the wording. It is not every shift and mutation 'in *the* social order' but 'in *a* social order' which produces social 'others.' What one needs to create is a systemless system, an endless becoming rather than a new social order. And one can not achieve this by obsessively recording the barcodes used by credit card machine or by documenting the identification numbers written on the helmets of riot police.

As an anarchist collective, we don't currently have the objective of making the state collapse. Instead, we see ourselves as planting small stepping stones towards a stateless way of life. Perhaps one might say we reside 'pre-figuratively' in the present, the here-and-now, perhaps one might say we are not yet even at this point of our praxis. But just like in a famous Islamic fable: even ants, if they carry water, have the power to put out a fire in the forest. When we look at social systems, the only thing which changes is the content, the heroes of the plot. But the plot remains the same, much like the Atari games in which we shoot alien invaders. In this context, solidarity can only be achieved by listening to your comrade; and when the opportunity presents itself, by strengthening the voice of your comrades. If the ethics of solidarity - as you know, anarchism is a philosophy which relies on ethics - can be shared amongst all who strive towards the same goal, then one will have rendered the state and the social system useless.



Ivo Furman: Like many others, I learned about your struggle through the blog you have online. Although your projects target public spaces and urban environments, your work reaches a wider audience through the Internet. What is the importance of the Internet as a tool for your struggle? Do you see the Internet as a vehicle to have your work reach out to a wider audience, or do you see the Internet as another site of struggle, a battleground? Would you define iç-mihrak as an activist collective with an ‘online’ presence? If so, what sort of a role does being online play in your activist practices?

İç-mihrak: We see the Internet as a vehicle for spreading word of our project to a larger audience. But it is also an environment of disformation deeply embedded within fascist discourse. As such, the Internet constitutes a terrain of struggle for us. You might know some of the people in this collective, you may have shouted slogans in demonstrations together with us, or even sat down to have a drink with some of us. However as a collective identity we have chosen to remain anonymous in the public sphere. Instead, we contribute in a symbolic or visual manner towards building a dissident culture. In this context, the Internet as a medium affords us a degree of both visibility and invisibility better than any fan-zine or printed publication can offer. Activism for us is about every person contributing as

much as they want (and can) as an gesture of solidarity. Within this broad definition, we chose visual cultures as the target of our activism. What we do with other activist groups is a matter of conscience, in terms of choosing to work with our comrades when we possess the capability to do design for them.

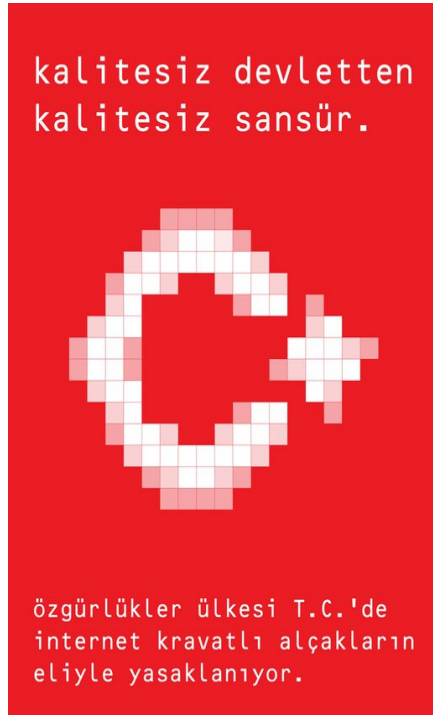
Ivo Furman: There is a Facebook group for iç-mihrak that is not managed by you. The moderator usually updates the page in parallel with your collective's blog. As of August 7th 2012, there have been over 43,405 people who have 'liked' the page. Although it is almost impossible for us to know the exact number of unique visitors who have seen the page, the number of 'likes' gives us a rough estimate about the number of visitors. If one is to compare this figure with the audience visiting your blog, which is more popular?

iç-mihrak: The number of people who follow blogs are limited. One cannot even begin to compare it to Facebook. However, the audience following our blog is quite diverse. We even have followers who do not speak Turkish. In comparison, we don't have an editorial link to the iç-mihrak Facebook page. In fact we haven't even met the people who update the page in person. As a result, the page has its own dynamics, and may not at times represent our collective's ideas and opinions.

Ivo Furman: One can see the existence of these kinds of Facebook pages as evidence that a struggle has reached a wider audience. But when one looks at this situation from a broader angle, one sees that social media platforms such as Facebook rely on shared user-generated content to aggregate massive databases which are then used to sell marketing data to 3rd parties. For example, when someone 'likes' the works of iç-mihrak, Facebook compares the data derived from this 'like' with other things the user has 'liked' on their profile. This data is then compiled and sold to 3rd party companies, which then use Facebook as an advertising platform. Therefore, although you might not be directly involved in this process, people who appreciate and share your work indirectly contribute to the profit making mechanism of capitalism. In this context, what are your opinions on social media and Web 2.0 technologies? Perhaps one should be a little careful when one says 'everything

belongs to everyone?'

İç-mihrak: In a place where everyone chooses to be abusive towards their partners, we try not to follow that way of life. In the same way, in a world where everyone is after some form of copyright, we reject the notion wholesale. Rejecting copyright for us is not a strategic issue but a matter of principle. We are aware that this allows for the avant-garde to appropriate our work. But no matter what, our nomadic representational machine will always be faster and more progressive than the totalizing representational machine of the state. So in other words, they can go ahead and use our designs as they wish.



Ivo Furman: Let us talk a little bit about the notion of culture jamming. The expression of hegemonic culture in public spaces is through symbols and narratives. Remembering the works of Roland Barthes and Sanders Peirce, one can say that narratives

and the symbols embedded in narratives have semiotic and affective structures which produce social reality. For me, the definition of culture jamming is about hijacking the affective and semiotic structures of hegemonic culture and about playing around with the social reality produced by these structures. Drawing from this, can one say that culture jamming shows us that what is imagined as reality is not a universal truth but something that is ideologically produced?

I now have a more complex question for you. I think that if one is to examine culture jamming as a philosophy, one sees that it has a nihilistic aspect to it. One of the fundamental assumptions within culture jamming is that truth is not universal nor that truth has an essence in itself, but that truth is something which is socially produced. Accordingly, truth as a category does not possess any qualities unique to itself but is dependent on contingent power relations that are imposed on society through physical and symbolic violence. To put it in another way, ideological realities within society rely on power to become hegemonic. Would you agree with this?

iç-mihrak: Is it possible not to agree? However, it is useful to also think about the following point: de-constructing or even decomposing machines such as culture jamming does not function in a symmetric manner to hegemonic culture. Therefore if you manage to render transparent the codes of hegemonic culture successfully, and instill within people a functional sense of scepticism, you create the potential of making society 'unusable.' The potential of culture jamming is based on this edge it possesses over the codes of hegemonic culture.

ATAMIZIN İZİNDEYİZ!



Ivo Furman: When one accepts that truth is something socially produced, one needs to be wary of several things. Firstly, if one is to develop the implicit assumptions within such a perspective, one can reach the following conclusion: by hijacking the narratives and symbols producing our social realities, one can produce alternative social realities. However, hijacking social realities will never bring us closer to a greater or more cohesive universal truth about the social order we inhabit. If this is the case, if it is impossible to reach a more just or utopian social order, what is the meaning of our struggle? Can we really say that the only thing separating us from hegemonic culture is the power relations we inhabit? How do you overcome this theoretical paradox within your practices?

iç-mihrak: This question of yours, much like classical anarchism's violence versus pacifism dilemma, has been a problem that has plagued post-anarchism for the past ten years or so. Derrida (1998) once said that "[t]here is nothing outside the text," that there is no concrete reality one can use as foundational support. In this moment, it is a good idea to take an 'affective' aid from Spinoza: the best political organisation is the one that increases happiness around the world, and the one

that reduces suffering. Looking at our contemporary systems of governance, can we really argue that these systems enhance the happiness of a vast majority of people they govern? That they have positive aspects to them? If we are to internalize French post-modernity, we need to reclaim the positive and liberating aspects of this philosophy so that we can even find therapeutic becomings in even the most pessimistic and iconoclastic thinkers.



Ivo Furman: Culture Jamming is a progressive and creative form of activism. It pushes individuals to interrogate hegemonic culture and start questioning themselves. However our relationship with hegemonic culture is not one-dimensional. The system takes a lesson from each step we makes, it learns from everything that we do. The system does not simply learn, it also borrows from radical practices to create value within the context of capitalism. Perhaps the best place to observe this dynamic in Turkey is the advertising industry. One can easily observe the guerrilla marketing techniques used by Turkcell⁴ when walking down Istiklal Avenue. Ironically, much of these guerrilla marketing techniques originate from activist practices. After a certain period, radical practices become mainstream and are recycled by capitalism as advertising

⁴ **Translator's note:** the largest mobile communications conglomerate in Turkey.

techniques. Within the context of a self-revolutionizing capitalist system, is iç-mihrak able to prevent its practices from eventually becoming streamlined into the mainstream as marketing techniques? How can one prevent the strategies and practices of resistance from becoming recycled into the capitalism as innovation and value?

iç-mihrak: I think we had given a similar answer to the previous question, but let me re-iterate: we cannot prevent the system from appropriating our discourse and products. Designing scandalous things might make it more difficult for the system to fully appropriate our products. In this sense, working to develop things which were discarded during the process of appropriation constitutes a departure point. However, the most important form of combat is to create new discourses and venture forth to chart out unthought islands of meaning within our imagination.



REFERENCES

- İç-mihrak. (2008) "Reportaj İç-mihrak," *Futuristika*. As Retrieved on July 19th, 2014 from <<http://www.futuristika.org/roportaj-ic-mihrak/>>
- Derrida, Jacques. [1967] (1998) "The Exorbitant: Question of Method" in *Of Grammatology, Part II*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 158-9, 163.

NAMES OF IMAGES

(in order of appearance)

- *Türksolu: bu kafayla soldan bahsetmeye yüzümüz yok!* (the Turkish left: one is embarrassed to call it 'Left' with our mentality!)
- *Ezilenler için isyan vakti!* (Revolution time for the oppressed!)
- *Dünyanın tüm öteki'leri! Birleşin!* (The others of the world! Unite!)
- *Kalitesiz devletten kalitesiz sansür* (Crappy censorship from a crappy state)
- *Atamızın izindeyiz* (We follow our ancestors) [note: 'Atamızın' is a play on meanings as the word can both mean biological ancestors and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic]
- *Devletin Şiddet tekeline karşı propaganda* (Progranda against the violence monopoly of the state)
- *Türkiye herkesindir* (Turkey belongs to all)

All images are by iç-mihrak and can be found on <<http://icmihrak.blogspot.com>> All images have permission to be distributed and published.