

Professional testimony

"Publishing and political commitment: different ways of being a publisher?" / [Journal Bibliodiversity](#),
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"We co-founded Metis Publishers as a group of radical students after the 1980 *coup d'État*"

Testimony of Müge GURSOY SOKMEN

Metis Publishers (Turkey)

Foundation

We co-founded Metis Publishers as a group of radical university students after the 1980 *coup d'État* which shattered the political and cultural organizations in Turkey and created an atmosphere of terror and shock, with the hope of continuing and deepening our political discussions. Our aim was to publish the books we wanted to read ourselves and bring them to the attention of our peers. We had no intention of being publishers, this was our idea of resisting while waiting for things to go back to normal. In a short time most of our friends went their separate ways and two of us ended up continuing as publishers (although mechanical engineers by education), probably because this was a profession we could do without being "engulfed by the system", which let us pursue our curiosity, hopes and dreams, and let us pretend that our passion for reading is a proper job.

Publishing line

We were children of "international times" – felt connected to the global community struggling for a better future for all of humanity, and concerned about what was going on all over the world. We had also grown up reading the best of world literary classics thanks to Turkey's vivid translation policy and these shaped our publishing approach.

In the dark times of 1980s Turkey, with tens of thousands of political prisoners, tortures and capital punishments, any book mentioning such facts would cost the publisher 7,5 years in prison – so we started "The World We Live In" series, touching on each atrocity in the country through an international example: e.g. solitary confinement and torture through writings of Bobby Sands, workers' issues through Solidarnosc etc. When we felt a bit safer we started the "Black and White Series" publishing the facts clouded by the misinformation of "colorful media".

Our list gained more variety as we continued our self-education. Suffering from lack of time to read literature, we started our literature series. The titles were mainly chosen for their literary merit, but most turned out to cover controversial subjects like homophobia, repressed histories, women's issues, tyranny of normality...

Capital: financial and human

The first decade or so was without any profit, so we did odd jobs to feed into publishing, using all our knowledge and skills: wrote and illustrated children's books, penned articles for encyclopedias, designed catalogs and journals, made technical translations...

Meanwhile, we were creating our readers in a way: offering what we thought were important issues of not only politics, but also philosophy (Frankfurt School came to our aid), history, and social sciences in general, never bothering to check the demand. It was a time when many bookshops closed down or refrained from selling "political" titles, so our books were first sold from hand-to-hand, person-to-person. We had no press coverage for years, nor any money for marketing or advertisement. Yet, thanks to peer advice, we were able to get enough attention in our books to make reprints.

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At first it was just ourselves, literally exploiting our own labor by overworking without any vacations. After the 1983 University Law change many people were expelled/resigned from the universities, and very good scholars became our authors or translators, acting in solidarity and rising the quality of independent cultural life. When we started two quarterly magazines in 1987, *Metis Translation* and *Defter* (on history, philosophy, literature and politics), all the editorial board also worked volunteer. The fruitful discussions we had helped us endure the prevailing pain in the country (and enriched our publishing).

Solidarity of independents - Freedom of publishing

Meanwhile we joined forces as small independents to revive the terrorized bookshops (being raided all the time), to mend the broken distribution networks (eventually we co-founded a distribution company with a group of independent publishers), to fight against the fierce censorship (backing each other in courtrooms even when we had very different political ideas).

We were put to court several times, as we refused auto-censoring and published whatever we thought the public should know. Dangerous subjects changed with the times, by the 90s Marxism was no longer a problem but the "Kurdish problem" was a taboo, and we ended up being tried for all sorts of crimes: obscene publishing, insulting the Army, insulting Turkishness, insulting religion, liability laws etc. We were always acquitted (suspended in one case), as we took care to publish careful investigations and objective critical titles, with our facts always double checked (and thanks to the efforts of wonderful lawyers, working almost pro bono in solidarity).

Surviving in the age of company globalisation

We felt relatively relieved in the late 1990s with the change of the political system in Turkey. But these were also the times of company globalisation, with independent publishing losing ground all over the world. We were partly saved from that in Turkey, thanks to a mixed blessing: Our market was too unstable to satisfy the global chains, pirating was yet to be taken under control, and the freedom of expression problem never completely ceased. Though we do have some conglomerates and gross “bank publishers” (yes, banks go into publishing in Turkey to attract young customers) in the market today, many of the best publishers are still the independents.

As for ourselves, slowly and slowly over the years, book by book, we realized we were getting some returns. Colleagues started to join us, and we always tried to keep the working conditions fair. We built up a reputation as a radical but unbiased publisher, true to their pact with the readers to publish reliable serious books, handpicked and worked on carefully. Established names and famous authors continued to submit their manuscripts to us, even when they were offered much higher advances from bigger companies. We always backed our publishing agenda with conferences, panels and symposia. Since big profit was never our goal, we could publish specialist books in lower quantities and opt to lose money on an important title if we are doing okay in general.

After over 30 years of publishing, with around one thousand titles of local and translated fiction and non-fiction in our list, having kept our critical minds open with the help of younger colleagues adding to our questions, we still manage to survive choosing only the books we like and find intriguing – so I would not mind being called a committed publisher.

Read [here](#) the issue 4 of the journal Bibliodiversity, coordinated by Sophie Noël, with the support of Luc Pinhas.