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Shattered and Rebuilt: How Trauma Transformed My Research in International Relations

Abstract

This essay recounts a stark, involuntary reinvention of my academic identity following a politically motivated targeting in 2017. Confronted with public accusations and legal scrutiny, my intellectual pursuits in poststructuralist and postcolonial theory became untenable. I detail the subsequent survival-driven shift to empirical, quantitative research. This narrative explores the multifaceted costs—intellectual, personal, and professional—as well as the unexpected gains of this transformation. It serves as a testament to the profound impact of external pressures on academic choices and challenges, offering a rare glimpse into the complex interplay between personal trauma and scholarly evolution within the field of political science.

Keywords
Political trauma, scholarly transformation, methodological evolution

One sunny December day in 2017, while I was working in the office, my phone began to buzz relentlessly. Moments later, colleagues knocked on my door—pale and hesitant—to tell me that I had appeared on the front page of a daily newspaper known for its hardline, ultranationalist, and aggressively pro-Eurasian political stance, one that routinely targets dissenting academics and critical intellectuals. There, in bold letters, I was accused of writing a pro-PKK book and of having exploited a state-funded scholarship to do so. The news metastasized quickly. Local newspapers in Sakarya picked it up, and by evening, social media platforms were flooded with calls for my dismissal. I received chilling phone calls threatening me with impalement. The frenzy was triggered by a deliberately distorted translation of a single sentence from my book. That isolated misreading was then amplified as if it were evidence of an entire political position. But facts no longer mattered. The machinery of outrage was in motion. Soon after, I learned that a prosecutor had launched an investigation against me. I was formally accused of legitimizing the PKK—a group designated as a terrorist organization in Turkey. The accusation struck at the core of my identity, not just as a scholar but as a human being.

What followed was not just a legal ordeal but a slow disintegration of my ordinary, peaceful life. The media campaign and court proceedings consumed my days and haunted my nights. My intellectual world—once filled with explorations of postcolonial theory,

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poststructuralism, Turkish politics, and ethnic movements—collapsed under the weight of fear and surveillance. I could no longer pursue the ideas that once inspired me. Desperate to rebuild, I made a radical shift in my research. But it was not a shift born of creative ambitions (Hill, 2020), tenure security, or institutional disruption (Bragaw, 2019; Bunds, 2021). It was a retreat—a survival mechanism in the aftermath of trauma. Sometimes trauma stems from witnessing violence in the field (Loyle & Simoni, 2017; Howe, 2022; Cohen, and Dorff, 2025), and sometimes, as in my case, it arises from direct external attacks that threaten a scholar's safety and professional standing. Therefore, my redirection was not voluntary—it was forced, shaped by fear, injustice, and the chilling silence that followed public disgrace.

The reminder of this essay provides an intimate chronicle of academic reinvention, tracing the profound intellectual and emotional transformation that followed a traumatic political targeting. I delineate the step-by-step process of rebuilding, revealing how I cultivated new research interests and acquired the empirical methods necessary to re-establish my scholarly identity. This is a story not merely of personal adversity, but of deliberate reconstruction, intellectual discipline, and unexpected professional redirection. For fellow political scientists confronting unforeseen disruptions[1]—from external pressures to institutional challenges or personal upheaval—this account offers a modest template for navigating and understanding radical shifts in scholarly practice.

Before the storm

I cannot fully trace what first drew me to critical theory—whether it was my early encounters with the state during the political climate of 28 February, or the courses I took as an undergraduate. As a high-school student at an İmam Hatip in Karasu, Sakarya, in 1997, I experienced first-hand the restrictive character of state authority during that period and observed the exclusionary practices directed at students who wore headscarves. What remains most salient to me is not the broader ideological debate on secularism, but the everyday enactment of exclusion in educational settings: I attended undergraduate courses while some female students, solely for covering their hair, were escorted out of classrooms by security personnel. During the same period, three undergraduate courses—Introduction to Political Science, Turkish Political Life, and Theories of Democracy—taught by Süleyman Seyfi Öğün, had a particularly formative influence on my intellectual development. I also read a number of books he recommended during these courses, including Albert Camus's "The Rebel" and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's "A Dangerous Game" (Die Panne), both of which contributed to my emerging interest in political and social critique. In my undergraduate years, I was introduced to poststructuralist thought, which became an important reference point in shaping my early academic orientation.

During my PhD years, I immersed myself in poststructuralist thought, devoting extensive time to reading and engaging critically with the works of Michel Foucault, Slavoj Žižek, and

Jacques Lacan. Although my dissertation focused on state discourse and was informed by Michel Foucault's theoretical insights, my broader academic agenda extended beyond that project, culminating in independent publications that examined how Turkish foreign policy operates as an extension of domestic power struggles (e.g., Balcı, 2007; Balcı, 2010). Drawing on the work of my supervisor, Burhanettin Duran—who had published studies on the domestic sources of Turkish foreign policy in the early 2000s—I combined his perspective with poststructuralist approaches. After completing the PhD program, my intellectual journey expanded further. I began to engage deeply with postcolonial theory, while continuing to explore the writings of Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau. At the heart of my research was a central claim: Turkey's foreign policy discourse is shaped not by strategic necessity alone, but by an ongoing power struggle among three major political blocs—Islamists, Kemalists, and Kurdish nationalists. Each of these actors, I argued, instrumentalizes foreign policy discourse to legitimize its position and actions within the domestic arena.

This line of thinking led me to a broader, more provocative research puzzle: Can ethnic terrorist movements have foreign policies? Despite their lack of legal recognition or legitimacy, such groups often make deliberate and strategic use of foreign policy discourse—seeking international sympathy, external alliances, and more importantly ideological validation for their struggle. Their language about the world politics, I believed, was not incidental but a calculated extension of their political agenda, aimed at legitimizing their cause and thereby constructing new political subjectivities. In 2015, I spent a year at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs to write a book on the PKK's foreign policy. The book sought to theorize the foreign policy behavior of ethnic separatist movements by drawing on concepts from postcolonial and poststructuralist theories. At the time, I believed I was pursuing a bold and timely question—one that had been largely overlooked in mainstream scholarship. I had no way of knowing that this very inquiry would make me a target, and that it would soon upend my life entirely.

An Intellectual "Diet"

After those tragic days throughout 2018, I made three solemn promises to myself: never again would I write or teach postcolonial or poststructuralist theory; never again would I write about the last fifty years of Turkish politics; and never again would I publish op-eds or appear on television. I was nearing forty, and it felt as though the academic world I had carefully built over the years had come to an abrupt and bitter end. In the mid-2018, my father passed away suddenly from a heart attack. Soon after, I had to leave Sakarya—the city of my childhood and adult life—to relocate to an unfamiliar place, Bolu, due to my wife's job. It felt like the final rupture with the life I had known. Everything that had grounded me—family, home, academic identity—had vanished. I began commuting to Sakarya just two days a week to teach my regular courses. The rest of the time, I found myself adrift, with long hours to wade

through the vast ocean of international politics literature, searching for a new direction, a new purpose—anything that could help me rebuild from the wreckage.

In that vacuum, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I turned to reading as a way to rebuild myself intellectually. My reading strategy was simple but disciplined: focus exclusively on the top ten journals in International Relations, read at least three articles per week, and maintain this routine for at least a couple of months.[2] It was, in many ways, like committing to a strict health regimen—cutting out junk food, eating only clean and measured portions, and sustaining it long enough to see real change. Or like beginning a serious bodybuilding program: forget the indulgences, show up at the gym consistently, and push through the initial pain. At first, the intellectual "diet" was painful. Just as a new gym-goer experiences soreness and frustration, I felt overwhelmed and mentally strained. The articles in these top-tier journals were methodologically rigorous, statistically sophisticated, and sharply focused on narrow empirical puzzles. I had no background in statistics at the time, and reading these pieces was often a humbling experience—each page a reminder of how far I was from the standards of this new scholarly world.

The greatest benefit I gained from this reading experience was a deep appreciation for methodological rigor. I learned how a scientific paper should begin with a compelling, intellectually arresting puzzle; how it must position itself within the relevant literature; and, most importantly, how it must rigorously demonstrate its central claim. While the topics varied widely, the structure and style across dozens of articles were remarkably consistent. After twelve months of sustained reading, I began to notice a shift—my own thinking started to take shape with greater clarity and discipline, mirroring the ordered logic of the articles I was consuming. This intense intellectual "diet" had a profound, almost subconscious effect on me. It didn't just inform/ expand? my knowledge; it restructured the way I thought. I finally felt ready to pursue new research topics through which I could rebuild an academic career for the rest of my life.

On the Hunt for New Topics

Before the trauma, I had only a passing interest in the Ottoman Empire from an international relations perspective. In 2018, that curiosity culminated in a collaborative article examining the Empire's decision to enter the First World War. I saw potential in Ottoman studies—it allowed me to explore international politics without touching the raw nerves of critical theory or the politically fraught terrain of the last fifty years of Turkish politics. It felt like a safe intellectual refuge. Still, the disciplined reading "diet" I had committed to was nudging me in another direction—toward empirical research. My first serious attempt led me into political psychology, specifically Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), a method developed by Margaret Hermann. I was drawn to the promise of systematically analyzing political leaders, but my lack

of statistical training made publishing in respected journals difficult. Collaborative projects faltered. Rejections came. Yet, I didn't lose hope. My motivation was simple and unshaken: I was a scholar, and I wanted to remain one.

Then, one day in late 2019, I stumbled upon an article on vote-buying in the UN Security Council by Axel Dreher and his colleagues. It was a revelation. The piece showed that one could be empirically rigorous and politically critical. I realized that critique need not be confined to abstract theory—it could also be grounded in data, exposing the hidden inequalities and injustices of the international system. That was the turning point. I resolved to teach myself the basics of statistics. It was time to rebuild—not just my career, but my intellectual identity. Around the same time, I was honored with the TÜBA Outstanding Young Scientist Award by the Turkish Academy of Sciences. This recognition provided the opportunity to fund a four-week training course on statistical fundamentals. I learned what standard deviation means, how difference-in-differences analysis works, and received a basic introduction to regression. Everything was new—technical, demanding, and often difficult to digest. But for the first time, I could begin to understand the statistical sections of the articles I had long admired. That was enough to keep me going.

I began focusing on elected members of the UN Security Council—their pathways to election and their voting behavior once seated. This line of inquiry led to the publication of several articles in respected journals. As my research deepened, I came to realize that voting behavior was shaped not only by material incentives such as vote-buying, but also by broader patterns of political interaction. One such interaction stood out: high-level leader visits. I began to see these visits not merely as diplomatic formalities, but as potential tools of influence—capable of shaping the decisions and alignments of other states in international politics. What intrigued me even more was how underexplored this topic remained within the discipline. Leader visits represented a rich and largely untapped area of study, offering new possibilities for empirical research and theoretical insight.

Who am I now?

What did this journey—from a scholar shaped by poststructuralist thought to one who now embraces the "science" in political science—truly cost me? What did it leave behind? Do I still consider critical theories to be part of science, or have they become, in my eyes, perspectives more akin to ideologies? Have I crossed into a realm of pure objectivity, or is that just another illusion we tell ourselves in the name of 'science'? Do I now believe the trauma was, in some strange way, a gift—that it set me on the right path? Or am I simply standing on a different edge of the same centuries-old cliff, overlooking the vast, unfinished project of human knowledge? These questions linger—not as doubts, but as reminders of the complexity of transformation. Beyond these reflections on my intellectual evolution, I have also come to a more sobering

realization: what I do is, in the end, a salaried occupation—one that puts food on the table. Perhaps this is precisely why the trauma had such a profound effect on me. I did not resist. I did not stand my ground on the ideas I once championed. I retreated.

This experience also clarified something often overlooked. As Norris (2021) shows, research excellence is shaped not only by individual ability or formal employment arrangements but also by the broader structure of working conditions—and especially by perceived job security. In her global survey-based analysis of political scientists, perceived security is positively associated with research productivity and impact, whereas formal tenure status itself is not a significant predictor. Put differently, "a subjective sense of job security matters more for building successful research careers than the legal conditions of contractual tenure" (Norris, 2021: 50-51). What sustains ambitious intellectual work is therefore not merely the protection provided by a contract, but the lived sense that one can speak, write, and take risks without anticipating punishment. When scholars feel safe, they pursue long-term projects and accept intellectual uncertainty; when that sense collapses, even successful academics often retreat into safer questions and quieter visibility. However, this is not the end of academic pursuit: there is always room for fruitful adaptation.

In this long process, one thing became clear to me: while transformation may be triggered by trauma or any other reason, genuine and fruitful transformation often follows the guidance of good examples. An old Iranian story illuminated my path. As I recall, it goes something like this: a pupil approaches a master poet and asks to learn the art of poetry. The master instructs him to memorize every poem by his favorite poet. The pupil returns, having done so, and asks what comes next. The master replies, "Now, forget them all." Many fail at this stage. Only those who succeed in forgetting truly learn how to create. I never consciously set out to forget what I had read during my intellectual "diet." But over time, I internalized its lessons. I learned, almost unconsciously, how to think scientifically—and more importantly, how to write. That reading diet, more than anything else, became the most important lesson I learned—and the one I most wish to share.

1 In the last decade, the community of scholars at risk has widened globally. The United States—traditionally regarded as one of the safest havens for academic freedom—has increasingly led this trend, particularly through politically driven investigations. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice's China Initiative, launched in 2018, targeted academic scientists suspected of economic espionage and led to numerous investigations of researchers of Chinese descent working in American universities (Xie et al., 2023).

2 Of course, this strategy is hardly new. From Seneca to Schopenhauer, selective reading—focusing on the best works while ignoring mediocre ones— is strongly recommended. Seneca advises extending our "stay among writers whose genius is unquestionable, deriving constant nourishment from them," while Schopenhauer warns that "bad books are intellectual poison; they destroy the mind."

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