On 22 September 1999 the dead body of an 18-year-old girl was found in a cemetery in Istanbul, Turkey. Massive media coverage was launched when the police announced that the perpetrators were three young men and a young woman, who, claiming to be Satanists, testified that one of them had ordered Satan to perform the murder. When the public prosecutor used the description of Satanism in the formal charges brought against the accused, Satanism entered the legal domain as a new crime for the first time in Turkish law.

The three perpetrators were judged guilty of murder and were sentenced to a total of 25 years in prison.

Although since the youths were imprisoned massive media coverage of their trials, talk shows and heated debates on various television channels where important public figures participated, all newspapers had covered the issue extensively in the period leading up to and in the days following the trial. There were judged guilty of murder and were sentenced to time in Turkish legal history. The three perpetrators were young men and a young woman, who, claiming to be Satanists, testified that one of them had ordered Satan to perform the murder. When the public prosecutor used the description of Satanism in the formal charges brought against the accused, Satanism entered the legal domain as a new crime for the first time in Turkish law. The three perpetrators were judged guilty of murder and were sentenced to a total of 25 years in prison.

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The police declared Satanism an organized terrorist group and began arresting youths who were considered to be connected. Plans for a series of hangings of Satanists were revealed, and bars and clubs accused of being frequented by adherents to the group were shut down.

This new, marginal issue of Satanism was appropriated by different sectors of Turkish society and placed into existing matrices. However, before commencing with the discussion, the following brief overview of constructionist theories offers useful tools for understanding the Satanism hype.

Social problems are, according to constructionists, socially constructed. Instead of concentrating on the analysis of actual practitioners as was done in early sociological literature, constructionists argued that there was no significant Satanist danger, although it has been defined as a social problem. Concentrating on the portrayal and representation of Satanism, they underlined such mechanisms as ‘scapegoating’ and stereotyping in public responses to Satanism. Accordingly, the formation of a stereotype involves the creation of a ‘reverse mirror image of one’s society’ in which the ‘evil enemy’ is depicted as having all those unflattering qualities that are present also in the virtues of that society. This activity aims at restoring an idealized society and serves the function of ‘uni- fying the conflicting elements within a society, by imposing unity on something that is fragmented’ (Jeffrey S. Victor: Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Press, 1993, p.41). It enables rising collective anxiety to be released, especially in times of increased tension.

If the ‘scapegoating’ is about constructing an ideal society, is it possible to find shared values behind their opinions on the issue of Satanism in Turkey? Indeed, there is a unifying activity occurring as a result of the shared patriarchal norms of both groups.*

Reading the newspapers
Both liberal/secular and Islamist newspapers present Satanism as a belief system, there is no indication that people can actually choose to believe in it. The Satanists are depicted as sick, demonized members of a terrorist group. They are deceived, seized and captivated by dangerous forces or coerced by the corrupt syste—this point is made to show that the situation in which they find themselves.

Both secularists and Islamists have made attempts to control the youth — which has become an area of contestation, just as ‘women’ — since they are the perpetrators of society and symbols of its ideals. Although the Kemalist regime paid special attention to gender roles and gender equality, it did not change the patriarchal order but merely maintained the cultural and social structure of Turkish society. Thus, both sides agree on setting unique styles that define an identity and offer particularity. They are collective articulations of a cultural critique that establishes and naturalizes a new self concept and symbolically challenges the dominant culture’s value system.

In accordance with constructionist explanations of Satanism hype, it can be seen that in the context of growing tension between Islamists and secularists a trigger event — murder story — appeared in one of the areas of contestation in Turkish society, revealing dissatisfaction with the moral order. Nonetheless, the two groups are united in their establishing of an enemy that incarnates all the negative virtues to which both aim to put an end. By overreacting and depicting this subculture’s members as deviants or terrorists, both sides downplay the possibility that Satanism may be presenting a social critique in the form of symbolic violations of social order. However, in both groups of newspapers as well as in the accounts in this article, what is lacking is the voice of the Satanists, both those who call themselves such and those who are simply perceived as such. Without this, our understanding of the dynamics of this subculture and whether it presents a social critique is limited and undoubtedly deserves greater attention.

* The arguments in this article are based on the author’s close reading of three liberal/secular and three Islamist newspapers, namely Milliyet, Hurriyat, Sabah, Yeni Safak, Zaman and Milliyet, for a 15-day period following the event.

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Monument of Satanism in Turkish Secularist and Islamist Newspapers

Media Representations
T. DENIZ EKREM

Construction of Satanism in Turkish Secularist and Islamist Newspapers

Media
ISIM NEWSLETTER 8/01

On 22 September 1999 the dead body of an 18-year-old girl was found in a cemetery in Istanbul, Turkey. Massive media coverage was launched when the police announced that the perpetrators were three young men and a young woman, who, claiming to be Satanists, testified that one of them had ordered Satan to perform the murder. When the public prosecutor used the description of Satanism in the formal charges brought against the accused, Satanism entered the legal domain as a new crime for the first time in Turkish law. The three perpetrators were judged guilty of murder and were sentenced to a total of 25 years in prison.