

The Value of Conversation

Tolga Bölükbaşı wanted to be a Visiting Scholar at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies for more than 20 years. In the mid-1990s as an economics undergraduate, he was greatly influenced by the work of Krupp Professor of European Studies Peter Hall on the politics of policy making; when he learned Hall was associated with CES, coming to CES became a goal. He was, in his words, “thrilled to reside next door to Professor Hall’s office.” An Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Administration at Bilkent University in his native Turkey, Bölükbaşı became a 2015-2016 Fulbright Senior Scholar at CES. His research during his stay at CES has focused on the politics of macroeconomic policy reform in Southern Europe, with a particular focus on Turkey.

CES: How has this year at CES advanced your work?

TB: What I have found to be most important has been good conversation. Over coffee, over lunch, in a seminar, in the Hoffman room, in the atrium, in the museum, in Harvard Yard, at a pub, we are all here for a conversation. People are so generous with their time. They wanted to share and listen and learn from you, which was so exciting, as I was learning from them. Yes, Harvard’s libraries are unmatched and there’s no question about the resources here. But the point of coming to CES is the exchange of ideas. I have watched a community of scholars interact and I learned so much about how they communicate their ideas. Here, it is about the conversation, not about winning the argument.

“Conversation about U.S. society, politics, and economy forces you to think about Europe in comparative terms.”

—Tolga Bölükbaşı

CES: What was different about looking at Europe while being at CES in the United States? Did that provide insight?

TB: Distance helps you reflect more on what you think and how you feel. Conversation about U.S. society, politics, and economy forces you to think about Europe in comparative terms. One issue is inequality. I’ve read so many great papers on inequality in the United States, and it made me think of the inequalities back in Europe.

CES: Tell us about your impressions of the visiting scholar seminar. What surprised you about it?

TB: As scholars, we’re not trained to talk to a crowd; rather, we are trained to talk to scholars in our field. At the visiting scholar seminars, you had anthropologists, economic historians, historians of all eras, and sociologists working on diverse areas of social theory. This made presentations

very difficult at first. The seminar forced me to communicate better. That is important because I felt I needed to communicate ideas to a wider audience. The seminars were informal but structured, so we could ask both informational as well as thought-provoking questions. The seminar built and sustained a community – a community around scholarly conversation. The conversations that continued right after the seminar on the lunch table were as interesting as the presentations.



Tolga Bölükbaşı

CES: What did you learn while at CES?

TB: How to ask better research questions, how to carry out a sustained conversation on a topic of common interest, how to be more humble about what you find.

CES: Can you elaborate on that?

TB: We love sweeping generalizations; we love stories in black and white. But when answering questions here, you’re forced to think in the grey zone, not in either/or terms. Social reality is very complex. I’m a comparativist by training, but this experience showed me that there is a wider world, that I will keep my eyes open to.