

Conversation with Prof.Dr. Fikret Şenses (September 2014).

**Prof. Şenses has obtained his BA, MA, and PhD degrees in England at Warwick, Lancaster and London (LSE) universities, respectively. Before, joining METU, he worked briefly at the research department of the Central Bank of Turkey as an Economist. He has been at the Department of Economics of METU since 1979 (until his retirement in May 2014) where he served as Department Chair during 1991-92 and as the editor-in chief of *METU Studies in Development* during 1983—87. He represented the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at the University Senate during 2010-2014 as an elected member. He was a member of various committees of the Turkish Academy of Sciences, including award juries and was the coordinator of Academy's foresight study in Economics. He served as a member of the Higher Education Council of Turkey during 2005-2009, and as a member of the Ethics Committee of Inter-University Council during 2004-2009. He was a visiting scholar at Harvard, Columbia (Fulbright fellow), Institute of Developing Economies (Tokyo) and Institute of Development Studies (Sussex University).**

*What drew you into economics? Has there been a particular scholar that inspired you?*

It was rather by chance than choice that I became an economist and enjoyed being one ever since. As a teenager, I was interested in social sciences in general. Among the government scholarships on offer to study in England, the nearest to my liking was Economics, so economics it was to be. Years ago, I had overheard a close relative remark that the best career path for a young person would be to study economics at the LSE. That might have also been at the back of my mind.

I still regard the opportunity I was given to study in England for so long as a chance of a life time. I still feel indebted to my country, suffering at the time from severe foreign exchange shortages, for this.

As an undergraduate student, I had the opportunity to listen to world class economists like Solow, Joan Robinson, Harrod, Hicks, Lipsey, and in later life, had my path cross with Graham Pyatt (my advisor at Warwick), A. I Mac Bean (my advisor at Lancaster), Hla Myint (my supervisor at LSE), Samuelson, Modigliani, Sen, Bhagwati (my counterpart at Columbia) and Krugman who were all important sources of inspiration.

All my teachers have contributed to my career in different ways to whom I would like to express my gratitude. You would perhaps be surprised to hear that one person who contributed most to my career as a teacher was Carl Tobey who was my English teacher in the first year of junior high school.

*You got your PhD at London School of Economics. What were LSE years like? What was your dissertation on?*

My choice of the LSE for graduate study among several other good offers was one of the best decisions I have ever made. LSE was (probably it still is) very much at the center of things. It was not only a prestigious academic center, but also the

center of political activity of all shades of leftist worldview. Meeting bright young men and women from different corners of the world (including Turkey), full of determination to change the world to make it a better place and engaging in hot debates with them over lemon tea (definitely, or should one say unfortunately, not over raki), and sometimes a pint of bitter is a part of my life I remember with nostalgia. ("Nostalgia is not what it used to be", as one graffiti on an LSE wall once read!).

Like most colleagues, I felt more or less obliged to think and write on Turkey. My dissertation was aimed at a critical assessment of Turkey's trade and industrialization policies during 1950-70.

*You have been working in Development Economics. What makes it so significant?*

It is a very interesting and important subject dealing with deep-seated problems like poverty, inequality, and unemployment confronting the majority of the world's population and with ways and means of solving these problems. I feel that we, in the academic community should be deeply concerned with such realities of everyday life at home and abroad. I regret the fact that economics as an academic discipline is drifting away from effectively tackling these issues.

*You have widely published in Turkey and abroad. Is there any particular publication that stands out as most significant to you personally?*

Without taking any of the credit away from my colleagues in Turkey who carried research in these fields to new heights, I must admit that I take pride in the fact that I conducted some of the early studies on subjects, such as Turkey's transition to and experience under neoliberalism, industrialization, labour markets, and poverty. As for my own assessment, I value them all not for their academic value but for the sheer fact that they involved "blood, toil, tears, and sweat", over days and nights, many weekends, and even summer holidays. When I once said I work and write during summer holidays and even on the beach, my very good friend Erol Taymaz once wittily and jokingly remarked: We can tell from the quality of your work! There is a grain (perhaps a bagful!) of truth in that!

On a more serious note, from my point of view, the METU Studies in Development special issue on development economics with contributions by scholars in the forefront of that discipline, which I edited, my books on Turkish industrialization and on poverty, written mostly during my sabbatical leaves at Harvard and Columbia, respectively stand out from the others. The joint paper with my dear friend Ziya Öniş on the post-Washington consensus received much international attention.

*You have been at METU for more than 30 years now. Would you say that the Economics Department has changed a lot over time? What do you see as the biggest challenges for the department going forward?*

Like all other institutions, our department has also changed over time. This is in the nature of things (I refuse to say "fitratında var"! ). I am not going to make the

mistake that some old/oldish people make in saying that things were better during their time. Our department's age profile has changed significantly in recent years. We now have a faculty with one of the lowest average age in the country. My retirement has no doubt contributed substantially to this outcome!

I have always had full confidence in youth. I hope and believe that the new generation will keep up the good work and maintain the enviable status of our department and take it to new heights. I already see signs of this happening. Our department's curriculum has always included subjects which I can broadly classify as those having a political economy focus, along with technical/quantitative subjects. This has been one of the strengths of our department and in many ways made it unique among their counterparts at home and abroad. I can only wish we preserve this balance.

*Having received the Educator of the Year award for three different years you are now one of the few professors at our university who possesses the Excellence of Teaching Award. What do you enjoy most about teaching Economics?*

Teaching has been one of the joys of my life. I always looked forward to my early morning (8.40) classes in introductory economics. I enjoyed them as much as one could enjoy his most valued hobby. This academic year will be the first after so long that I shall miss this out. All good things in life have an end, as the saying goes.

Teaching at the graduate level, apart from its joy, has provided a forum of mutual learning for me and my students. My relations with students, like all good relationships in life, have depended on mutual love and respect. Seeing former students ascending fast in their professional careers, is a feeling that I, along with others in the teaching profession, find hard to describe.

*What do you wish to say about your time in METU as a faculty member?*

I would like to say and go on record that I have been very proud of being a part of this university and department. In fact, I would not have come into academic life had I not been given the chance of joining this community. I owe it to this institution that I have had a very (and increasingly –who says *diminishing* marginal utility?) happy professional life. Every time I passed through the gates of this university and entered the department I felt that there was no better place to be. The academic, administrative and service staff alike and my students have all been very dear for me.

*You recently retired. Do you have any special plans for retirement apart from lecturing in our department? We are very happy to hear that you will still be around. What do you plan to do you in your spare time?*

As you say, I shall be teaching; one graduate course each semester. This will be a somewhat soft landing to a new stage of my life. Retirement surrounds one with mixed feelings which are also very hard to describe. For once you have the opportunity to sit back **and** look back. There is now more time to reminisce.

These days I am basically in this mood. I sit by the shore with a book in hand; listen to the sound of waves (how romantic!) together with different genres of music. To use a musical analogy, retirement for me is a feeling that makes one go back and forth between Rolling Stones singing “it is the evening (I am in an optimistic mood today!) of the day-as tears go by” and Sinatra singing “my way”. During the four months since retirement I have read a lot, travelled- so far mainly for academic purposes- gone on very long morning and evening walks, spent much time at the seaside, and enjoyed the visit of my daughter and her family (most notably my lovely one-year old grandson, Ozan Şenses) from far afield. My plans for the future, if everything goes well (*ceteris paribus!*), are basically more of the same ,really. I might spend more time watching movies and plays as winter sets in, and create all the opportunity to travel, seeing different parts of the world which remains my best hobby. Academically, my immediate plans, apart from teaching, include finishing a book I have long been working on and presenting in December at a conference on Turkey in Iran. I am also lined up for a TV program on the Turkish economy. I do not know if I am capable of doing it, but for the medium term I would very much like to write a short book for kids (primary school children and kids in their early teens) on human rights, democracy, , and the environment, in a nutshell, on “how to be a good citizen of the world?”