

## OBITUARY

# In memoriam: Fikret Şenses (1947 – 2023)

Murat Koyuncu 

Boğaziçi University

Email: [mkoyuncu@boun.edu.tr](mailto:mkoyuncu@boun.edu.tr)

The passing of Fikret Şenses on January 20, 2023 after a long battle with cancer has left a void in the social sciences in Turkey in more ways than one. Şenses was a much loved and revered professor of economics at the Middle East Technical University (METU) for over 40 years and a member of *New Perspective on Turkey's* Editorial Board.

Dr. Şenses was born in 1947 in Samsun. He graduated from the *Samsun Maarif Koleji* as the valedictorian of his class. He then went on to obtain his bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees in economics from the University of Warwick, University of Lancaster and the London School of Economics and Political Science, respectively. After a short stint at the Research Department of the Central Bank of Turkey, he started his life-long academic career at METU's Department of Economics in 1980. Here he served in various academic and administrative positions, including department chairman and elected member of the University Senate. He was the editor of the faculty journal, *METU Studies in Development*, between 1983 and 1987. He collected an array of awards both for his teaching and research, including ones from the Turkish Academy of Sciences and the Turkish Economics Association. He was a visiting scholar at Harvard, Sussex, and Columbia Universities and also at the Institute of Developing Economies, Tokyo.

Fikret Şenses had an unshakeable belief in the possibility and, more importantly, the *necessity* of making the world a better place for the most disadvantaged, a belief which also led him to work on questions of economic development, poverty, and inequality. He authored numerous books and articles emphasizing the humane and societal facets of the economic policies of developing countries and the transformations they go through.

Prof. Şenses' early work focused on two areas that were critical for the developing countries: industrialization strategy and stabilization and structural adjustment policies. His work on industrialization made the case for a return to a planned economy but using a South Korean-style industrialization strategy where the selective and temporary incentivization of certain sectors and the close monitoring of the performance of incentivized firms were the main ingredients, instead of an overall *big push* strategy that aims for an across-the-board development of all sectors (Şenses, 1989, 1990, 1993a). Even though his recommendations did not rouse much interest amongst policy makers at a time when *laissez-faire* had become the motto, the relevance of his recommendations has been rendered more obvious via the recent discussions in the literature around the notions of developmentalist state and premature deindustrialization of developing countries.

His second area of interest, stabilization and structural adjustment policies, was at the top of the economic policy agenda for Turkey throughout the 1980s. The country suffered through a military coup in 1980 which led to a fast-paced and turbulent liberalization of its economy as one of the early adopters of the so-called Washington Consensus policies. As a close observer of the era, Şenses emerged as an early critic of neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus. He not only analyzed the aggregate effects of these policies with a particular focus on their long term impacts (Şenses 1981, 1983, 1988, 1990a, 1994a, 1995a, 1995b; Şenses and Kırım, 1991), but also pioneered research on the labor market effects, one of the overlooked topics at that time, underlining the unemployment outcomes of such policies (Şenses 1990b, 1991, 1993b, 1994b, 1996). As the Turkish economy increasingly took part in the globalization process of the 1990s, his attention turned towards the adverse effects of the new economic order on the masses. His timely book, *Küreselleşmenin Öteki Yüzü: Yoksulluk* (The Other Face of Globalization: Poverty), published in 2001, quickly became a reference guide for Turkish-speaking scholars in the field (Şenses, 200). He followed on the theme with several co-edited books and articles in the following years. His cooperation with Z. Öniş, in particular, resulted in many influential pieces (Öniş and Şenses, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2022; Öniş, Şenses and Bakır, 2013) that brought forth a thorough assessment of the neoliberal transformation of the Turkish economy from a critical perspective.

Şenses continued producing impactful academic work till the end, undeterred by his severely deteriorating health. His most recent piece in NPT on the stormy period that the Turkish economy went through during the last months of 2021 reached a worldwide audience quickly thanks to his insightful analysis of the macroeconomic events and their social impact (Şenses, 2022).

Looking at his impressive body of work, one notices that he consistently produced in different subfields of development economics at a time when many declared the death of the field. For those who sat down in Prof. Şenses' famous graduate Development Economics course with its syllabus that was completely renewed every year, it was no surprise when the field was born out of its ashes soon enough, as he always emphasized the fundamental importance of the field. Swimming against the tide was not foreign to him. He was an outspoken critic of the mainstream neoclassical approach in economics, in particular how it was devoid of power relations, political economy, and institutional details of different countries and ignoring the rest of the social sciences.

He was also adamantly against the current wave of hyper-specialization amongst social scientists. He rightfully argued that those who only read in their own narrow specialization area can never properly understand social and economic phenomena with so many complex ties necessitating analysis and knowledge from other social sciences.

As a rare academic who thought deeply about the teaching side of the job, Prof. Şenses produced many articles on undergraduate teaching of economics. But his most important contribution was the introductory level textbook (Şenses, 2017) that reflected his eclectic approach to economics. As its name suggests, *İktisada (Farklı Bir) Giriş* ((A Different) Introduction to Economics) is unique in its handling of the subject. The book opens with a chapter on the history of economic thought that spans the field from its ancient Greek roots to current debates on degrowth. The ensuing chapters are on the world economy and the Turkish economy, respectively. The rest is composed as a guide to main economic terms via real world examples such as the one that looks at the egg producers in South East Turkey to understand the economies of scale.

Prof. Şenses had a profound love for teaching. He saw his students as colleagues and always treated them kindly and respectfully. His office lights would be on through midnight as he spent countless hours diligently marking exams and commenting on student papers. I was one of his lucky students who received his comments as his thesis advisee, and I still remember my pages being returned to me with invaluable notes and comments, all in a few days. I probably did not acquire the art of writing as clearly and succinctly as Şenses did, but I had the chance to experience his incredible support and mentorship throughout my life. One can witness his impact on several generations of students by inspecting the love and respect pouring into the memorial webpage of his home department.<sup>1</sup>

Fikret Şenses always felt indebted to his country and its people. As an engaged intellectual, he paid back not only with his voluminous academic output but also through popular writing. In his pieces, he heavily criticized the dismal state of the university system in Turkey, identifying the lack of freedom of speech as a central issue. It is rather telling that the beginning and the end of his career were marked by dark times of the Turkish academia. In 1981 right after the coup, he criticized the establishment of a new higher education agency, YÖK, controlled directly by the central government, on the grounds that it would be the end of the freedom necessary to produce scientific knowledge at the universities (Özler, Şenses, and Türel, 1981).<sup>2</sup> He was then a young assistant professor. At the end of his career came the academic purges of 2016 against those who signed a petition calling for an end to state violence in the Kurdish cities known as Academics for Peace. He authored another op-ed (Şenses, 2017) calling the authorities to stop the witch hunt against the signatories of the statement. As a recently retired professor this time, he was upset not only at the authorities but at the academia at large, because of their silence against this atrocity which exhibited an existential conflict with the principles of production of scientific knowledge (Boz, 2020).

Professor Şenses was a role model for all academics: an embodiment of integrity, hard work and concern for the welfare of the underprivileged masses, always serious about his responsibilities, yet kind and humorous to all around him. He will be sorely missed by his family, students, and the academic community.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://econ.metu.edu.tr/en/memorialfs>

<sup>2</sup> Şenses coauthored a newspaper article on the new higher education law with G. Özler and O. Türel that appeared in *Cumhuriyet*, on 21st of November, 1981. This law was the first of many damages that the military junta of the September 1980 coup inflicted upon the Turkish universities. The damages would exacerbate with the martial law No. 1402 that dismissed nearly 150 university members from various universities. Most had to quit the academia and/or leave the country.

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