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Conservative-Neoliberal Alliance and Popular Resistance in Turkey

The Uprising in Turkey

by PETER MAYO

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The New Right has often been defined as an amalgam of a commitment to USA driven neoliberal economics with conservative values. We saw this in England where Thatcherism took on the form of neoliberal economics, characterized by de-industrialization and the pervasive rule of the market and old Victorian conservative values. We had the same thing under Reagan in the US and the two Bushes, the younger one foregrounding a specific form of bigoted Christian politics alongside the well established neoliberal policies. Turkey seems to be providing another manifestation of this kind of alliance under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP Party where thousands are taking to the streets to oppose the current regime of old Islamic, anti-secularist values sitting comfortably with large-scale US based Neoliberal capitalism.



In all cases, the violent nature of capitalism itself, and especially Neoliberal capitalism, with its history of bloodshed, well known to Turkey with its US driven 1980 coup and the 1977 May Day massacre at Taksim Square, made its presence, and (in Turkey's current situation), is making its presence felt. There has been an escalation of this in Turkey over the last few weeks. We first witnessed protests against the purported Government induced explosions on Saturday May 11 in Reyhanli next to the Syrian border that left 51 people dead. I was recently in Ankara for a conference on Critical Education and, together with an international friend and Turkish colleagues and friends, joined peaceful student (University of Ankara) protests against the media cover up or alleged distortion of this event. Similar protests in downtown Ankara the following Saturday led to police spraying protesters with tear gas. Among those hit were distinguished speakers at the conference. These skirmishes occurred against a background of intense left wing academic events taking place in the Turkish capital, including the well attended international critical education conference at the University of Ankara and a talk by Bertell Ollman in another venue. More recently we have had the widely internationally reported protests against the Neoliberal-Islamic orthodoxy scenario itself triggered by an attempt on the Government's part to enclose another part of the commons, a public space (Gezi Park) in Istanbul. There were other protests in between, such as protests in Istanbul against the sacking of a number of employees by the national carrier, Turkish Airlines.

As observed by one graduate student I recently worked with in a course I conducted at a Turkish university, the AKP's neoliberal policy partly rests on the construction sector which involves selling public land to private businessmen. It also partly rests on the creation of real estate speculation which has led to urban gentrification through which people are displaced from their neighborhoods.[ii]



She reproduced a Facebook comment by a teacher: “Could I be revolting against the fact that I won’t be able to have my own house or I will have to work for it like a donkey for 25 years while for the past ten years the commercials for houses have been clanging to my ears and I have been witnessing Agaoglu’s [a prominent businessman] ascension? “.

And, as with the manifestations in Tunisia, Egypt, Europe, South America (e.g. the student protests against the Pinochet educational legacy in Chile) and the USA (in the latter case through student protests, riots and the Occupy movement), we have a manifestation of ‘people power.’ This is fuelled by digital technology as a mobilizing force but it has been spreading out to tangible public spaces such as squares and streets.[iii] People are urged and motivated to leave the isolated comfort zones of their homes and computer spaces to reclaim the public spaces of the squares and streets. It is there, in the most tangible and materially ‘real’ agora, that one witnesses their alternative politics to the more insidious and at times ‘new fascism’ politics played out through representative bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

The Turkish protests occur against some of the most brutal fascist repressive tactics, involving widespread use of teargas and alleged use of pepper spray, pressured water, plastic bullets and beatings from the police.[iv] They occur in various localities, notably the major cities on both sides of the Bosphorous, and are of an unprecedented scale. According to an official press release, there were protests in 78 out of 81 cities. This therefore includes all big cities and also some traditionally conservative cities. People and organizations from all walks of life, including labor unions, teacher unions, student unions and academics, are involved. It has been observed that although the National Movement Party did not support the protests, some of its members, especially younger members, joined in, albeit for specific reasons.



These neoliberal economic policies bifurcate an ever increasing working class, (although not all members in this precarious situation see themselves as ‘working class’), including people with or without highly valued formal education qualifications. The more these policies do so, the more likely are they to incur the wrath of and provoke well worked out oppositional strategies by people who not only ‘feel’ but also ‘know’, to play around with Gramsci’s phrase.

The key question that arises is: Is this just a case of spontaneity or is there also some conscious direction being provided? Is there an emerging political force or alliance of forces capable of providing this direction and unifying the various movements engaged in this determined attempt to bring down the Erdoğan government? Gramsci spoke of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious direction,’ (spontaneità e direzione consapevole) as he mused on the situation in Italy and elsewhere in his times, against the historical backdrop of various uprisings in Europe. This key question applies to most of the uprisings which have occurred and are still present in various parts of the world. There is no guarantee regarding the political trajectory which these manifestations of indignation will take. The impression though is that this indignation is taking a decidedly left wing trajectory in Turkey. Leftist groups are heavily involved without taking centre stage and a leadership role. Some of the unions involved, such as the very visible teachers union, Eğitim-Sen, with its whole array of publications, focusing on critical education, and organizational activities and facilities, are decidedly left wing. They embrace the secularist legacy of Mustapha Kemal ‘Ataturk’ without engaging in any exclusive notion of ‘Turkification,’ foregrounding the value of solidarity with the downtrodden in all their class and ethnic dimensions.

The Neoliberal nature of Turkey is there for all to see. It is there in the skylines of its major cities such as Ankara and many parts of Istanbul where mosques co-exist with US downtown-style skyscrapers and the lurid lights of a full-fledged capitalist market economy, also given a decidedly Turkish flavor not only inside these Turkish cities but also outside Turkey with the mushrooming of Turkish fast food outlets with their kebabs and wraps. Manifestations of the global market, in the form of competing English language schools, a booming private university industry and various corporate brands, project Turkey’s image as a country having ‘grown up modern.’

Then there is the contradictory role of the army, currently being weakened by the Erdoğan government through arrests of various figures on a variety of grounds. On the one hand it serves as the bastion of secularism, Atatürk's great legacy in a country where his image looms large in each and every corner, including public offices, TV stations and university halls and auditoriums. This secularist image has often been questioned by many. On the other hand, it has been at the centre of Turkey serving as an important player in NATO and a satellite state for the USA's geopolitics in this part of the world, a role which assumed sinister proportions when this very same army, at the behest of the CIA, carried out a number of *coup d'états* including that of September 12 1980. The last mentioned echoed the equally infamous one carried out in Chile, for similar purposes, seven years earlier (this year marks its fortieth anniversary) and around the same time of the year – just a difference of one day (11 September , 1993). All this forms part of the historical background regarding Turkey. There is hitherto no connection whatsoever between this movement of basically peaceful protestors, including environmentalists and other groups, and the army who are exhorted by protestors to keep away from the struggle.

The tensions in Turkey have not abated since then with the May Day shootings of 1977 having led to this event being banned and then allowed to be reintroduced later with important provisos –the government had a say on who was allowed to participate and who was not. 2011 was the first time when everyone was allowed to participate, probably because elections were around the corner. And yet there were tensions and skirmishes this year when, on the pretext of works carried out around Taksim Square, the government sought to prevent the holding of this event, only for protestors to take to the square. Despite different forms of repression, the Turkish people still attempt to own the squares and streets when giving vent to their anger and delivering their protests, turning them into global squares and streets because of the global media interest they attract. Each Saturday, women converge on Galatasary square, just like the *Madres* of Cinco de Mayo in Buenos Aires, to protest and lament the loss of their loved ones during the years of the coup which cemented the ushering in of Neoliberal policies. They have been doing this for a number of years.



People power makes its presence felt in Turkey and has been doing so for quite some time in a variety of sites. This time, though, this manifestation of people power has been marked by an exponential growth in the number of people involved. It adds a new chapter to the volume of uprisings that are symptomatic of an almost universal dissatisfaction with Neoliberalism and the

huge disparities in living conditions it has spawned. The task is for the emergence of a national and international ‘modern prince’ (unifying element, party or alliance of movements)[v] capable of providing a unifying political direction to this groundswell with the hope that it stems the process of Capitalist encroachment on and commodification of all aspects of our lives and sets the stage for the required deep rooted changes in the world economic system to ensure a decent life and greater social stability for the world’s 99%.

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All photos by Kemal Inal.

Notes.

[i] I am indebted to Hasan Aksoy, from the University of Ankara, Sezan Bayhan from Bogazici University and Peter McLaren, from UCLA, for their feedback on an earlier draft. I thank Kemal Inal, from Gazi University, for his provision of the accompanying photos. He takes picture credit for them and they are published with his permission.

[ii] I am indebted to Sezan Bayhan from Bogazici University for this point and the teacher’s quote reproduced and translated from Facebook.

[iii] See Panagiotis Sotiris (2013), ‘Guest post: The new ‘age of insurrections’ is far from over!’ in Radiobubble.gr. <http://international.radiobubble.gr/2013/06/guest-post-new-age-of-insurrections-is.html>

[iv] See Bugu Melis Caglayan (2013), ‘Occupy Istanbul As riots erupt across Istanbul, our correspondent tells us why Turkish youth are furious’ in *Dazed Digital*, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/16245/1/occupy-istanbul>

[v] Gramsci had in mind a party which echoing Machiavelli’s Il Principe, will unify the country, according to the Sardinian’s view, in the form of a ‘national-popular’ alliance which might take

the form of a deeply entrenched new ‘historical bloc’. See Sotiris’ recent 2013 post once again on this (endnote iii).