

A Brief Gramscian Analysis of the First Five Years of the AKP

How the Organic Intellectuals of Turkey Helped Cement the Power of Erdoğan and his Party

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will try to underline the role of intellectuals in Turkey during President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's first five years as Prime Minister¹ in establishing his hegemony. The analysis will be conducted using a Gramscian approach. I will begin the paper by presenting the framework. I will give a brief definition of the concepts called *organic intellectuals* and *historical bloc*, coined by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. Following the theoretical introduction, I will give empirical evidence, using excerpts from articles and interviews of three prominent intellectuals² who are known as the *Birikim* troika³ in the Turkish academic and journalistic sphere. It is worth noting that two out of the three writers included in the paper were well-known full professors of economics and comparative literature in Galatasaray University and Istanbul Bilgi University, respectively. These authors, while claiming to be socialists and Marxists, gave Erdoğan and his openly conservative and right-wing party, AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), full support until 2013. The breaking point in the relationship between the writers and

¹This timeframe corresponds to the entirety of his first term, and the beginning of his second term in power.

²Some of these articles and interviews are only in Turkish. The English translations have been done by me. Naturally, all responsibility concerning any confusion or faults in translation is entirely mine.

³*Birikim*, meaning *accumulation* or *accumulated knowledge*, is a Turkish journal which had been focusing on Marxist thought between 1974 and 1980, until it was shut down by the military junta. After it started being published again in 1989, the journal accommodated authors from other intellectual circles as well. The journal's tagline is *Monthly Journal of Socialist Culture*. The term *Birikim troika* was coined by the Turkish political scientist Ümit Cizre in her edited volume, *The Turkish AK Party and its Leader: Criticism, Opposition and Dissent*, edited by Ümit Cizre, Routledge, 2016.

Erdoğan was the *Gezi Park Resistance Movement*⁴, where the government's methods of repression and police brutality made the movement famous worldwide. I will conclude the paper with the final analysis and suggestions for further research for readers who are interested in the subject.

ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS AND HISTORICAL BLOC

Antonio Gramsci is widely recognized as one of the most important Marxist theorists of the twentieth century. His most important contribution to Marxist political theory has been the introduction of the concept of *hegemony*. In this context, Gramsci argues that the bourgeoisie does not merely use brutal force during its everlasting quest to subordinate the proletariat. To achieve that, "the dominant class must establish its own moral, political and cultural values as conventional norms of political behaviour. This is the essential idea embodied in 'hegemony' [...]" (Femia 3). According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals play an instrumental part in the establishment and continuity of cultural hegemony. The term organic intellectual appears in Gramsci's most internationally acclaimed work, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, with the aim of differentiating the new intellectuals of the capitalist system from the *intelligentsia* as we know it. The familiar *intelligentsia* corresponds to the traditional intellectuals that considered themselves to be a separate social enti-

⁴The *Gezi Park Resistance Movement* was a protest movement that occurred during the summer of 2013. Originally beginning as a sit-in against the destruction of a park in central Istanbul, the protests spread throughout the country, generally as a result of police brutality. For more information, see: *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #occupygezi*, edited by Umüt Özkırıklı, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

ty, not linked to the dominant class. Gramsci states that:

The intellectuals are the dominant group's⁵ 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These comprise: 1. The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. 2. The apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed. (12)

The organic intellectuals also have an important role to play during the establishment of the historical bloc. For Gramsci, the conception of historical bloc is a point of departure from Marx⁶. Putting it simply; whereas Marx had argued that the superstructure was determined entirely by the economic base structure, i.e. the forces and relations of production, the economic and material conditions of people would determine the cultural, political institutions of everyday life etc., Gramsci disagreed with him on this issue. He argues that, with the establishment of the historical bloc, structure and superstructure are unified and the hegemony of the ruling class is constantly being reinforced and the relationship between the two structures does not remain unilateral. One of the most important Gram-

⁵ The reader should keep in mind that Gramsci wrote these notebooks in the prisons of Italy under the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, thus, he uses the word "group", instead of "class", the traditional Marxist jargon, for fear of censorship. Notes are mine.

⁶ While methodologically a Marxist, Gramsci has disagreed with Marx on several different points, going so far as declaring the October Revolution of 1917 as "the revolution against Kapital!"

scian scholars, Stephen Gill, defines the historical bloc as such:

It refers to an historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies, or broadly, an alliance of different class forces politically organized around a set of hegemonic ideas that gave strategic direction and coherence to its constituent elements. [...] For a new historical bloc to emerge, its leaders must engage in 'conscious planned struggle' in both political and civil society. Any new historical bloc must have not only power within the civil society and economy but it also needs persuasive ideas, arguments and initiatives that build on, catalyze and develop its political networks and organization. (60-61)

In the upcoming part, I will demonstrate with examples as to how those "persuasive ideas, arguments and initiatives" were propagated by the organic intellectuals of Turkey.

AKP AND THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS OF TURKEY

Before demonstrating the role of the organic intellectuals in Turkey, it would be important to give a brief presentation of the context in which examples from their works will be examined. The social force which employed them, AKP, first came to power following the elections in November 2002⁷, right after Turkey experienced the most destructive economic crisis of its history in February 2001. The founding members of the party had split from the Islamist party tradition in Turkey, announcing that they would be more reformists, and would align themselves more with the centre-right conservative democratic position, essentially pledging allegiance to the project of in-

⁷ Erdoğan, who is the founding leader of the party, was not allowed to run in the elections, since he was banned from active politics on 1998 for a period of five years. After the parliament voted to remove his political ban, he got elected in a by-election on 2003 and took office as Prime Minister, a post he held until his election to Presidency in 2014.

tegrating with global capitalism. The electoral campaign of AKP prior to being elected saw a fundamental departure from the Islamist discourse, adapting it to conform with the rising neoliberal trend in the world, emphasizing specifically their ambition to become a member state of the European Union. The AKP combined this liberal discourse with Muslim elements and demonized the authoritarian Kemalist⁸

Organic intellectuals play an instrumental part in the establishment and continuity of cultural hegemony

the Turkish Armed Forces in the name of protecting the Turkish democracy⁹ were portrayed as the main factors which impeded the democratization process of Turkey. With the carefully planned use of these elements, AKP received significant national and international support. Following an “e-memorandum” posted by the Commander of the Turkish Armed Forces on April 27, 2007, the AKP decided to do everything they can to mobilize their supporters and call for a snap election. Receiving praise from the intellectuals for their “honourable” stand against a possible military intervention, the AKP was able to form a second consecutive majority government by obtaining 46.58% of the votes and 341 deputies out of the 550 in the Assembly¹⁰.

⁸ Kemalism is defined as the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey. Established by the founding leader of the country, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the roots of Kemalism principally lie with French Enlightenment values: secularism, nationalism and economic liberalism, together with a break from the Ottoman past and rapid Westernization of the country.

⁹ The military was considered to be a “shadow actor” in Turkish politics, having intervened directly or indirectly on 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. The *coup d'état* of 1980 was the most brutal one, whereas it was the intervention of 1997 which has been generally used in AKP's discourse, since it was directed against one of the former parties in the Islamist party tradition. The failed intervention of July 2016 has been omitted for two reasons: a) its apparent failure and questions about its authenticity, and b) it occurred almost a decade after the epoch with which this paper is concerned.

¹⁰ The official results are published in the website of the Supreme Electoral Board (in Turkish): <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/1983-2007-yillari-arasi-milletvekili-genel-secimleri/3008>.

modernization project of the early 20th century. In addition to the Kemalist modernization project, the ongoing attitude of

Ahmet İnsel, a professor of economy and a former dean of the Faculty of Economics of Université Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne and Galatasaray University, was one of the organic intellectuals that supported the rise of AKP. He attempted to analyse the progress of the movement using a liberal dichotomy of centre/periphery, despite having written extensively on socialism and claiming to be a socialist. In his 2003 article, published both in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* and the website of Birikim, İnsel argues that after the *coup d'état* of 1980 and the establishment of the new constitution which carries heavy military and statist influences, the society was confined to the periphery, since the new regime strictly patrolled any kind of political activity and did not allow anything outside the Kemalist republican structure to be represented. Following the rapid economic liberalization period of the 1980s, the peripheral society used the economic opportunities to re-emerge as a significant group. The AKP is the latest, and so far, the most powerful representative of the new middle class. İnsel defends the so-called democratic stance of the AKP in every aspect, except for their attitude on women, and writes that:

“The program's [...] statement that democracy is distinguished from all other regimes by the fundamental principle of the sovereignty of the people, and its definition of democracy as a system based on tolerance are all signs that AKP could be a consistent defender of a pluralist parliamentary regime.” (304)

İnsel concludes his article by expressing his high hopes and expectations from the AKP:

The unexpected new composition of the parliament, the fact that the party positioned at the most distant point from the state has formed a majority government, and the aspirations and expectations of the new middle classes supporting this party provide reasons to think that an opportuni-

ty for a mild but radical exit from the September 12 regime has arisen. The realization of such an exit, not by the traditional Westernizers, but by a movement like AKP, which Westernizing-statist elites regard with suspicion, will finally make the normalization of Turkey's century-old Westernization adventure possible. (306)

Another one of the powerful intellectuals who had supported AKP until 2013 is Murat Belge, a comparative literature professor at Istanbul Bilgi University. Known for his contribution to Turkish Marxist literature with important translations such as the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* by Karl Marx, Belge had welcomed the AKP as the "secret and unwanted left-wing" party of Turkey. In an interview with Ruşen Çakır, an important journalist who focuses on Islamic movements in Turkey, Belge states that: "The leftism of AKP isn't an apparent, ideological phenomenon, it originates from their class origins." (Belge 2003) For someone who claims to be a Marxist, Murat Belge hesitated to criticize the AKP as much as he criticized the left-wing movements in the country. In his 2009 paper, he praises the AKP for pursuing the aim of European Union membership, insisting that this is a code name for the democratization of Turkey and emphasizes once again that he sees the military as the main obstacle.

In reality, all factors that create instability and undermine the ordinary functioning of society contribute to the dominance of the military and legitimize its interventions. In this respect the socialists have much to learn from the AKP, which, knowingly or not, has employed a version of Gramscian strategy in gaining ground and avoiding confrontation, although this policy may now have come to an end with the assault on the party emanating from the judicial branch of the Kemalist state." (Belge 19)

It remains a mystery if Belge, who had a falling-out with AKP and Erdoğan in 2013, and has been criticizing them ever since, has realized or not, that thanks to his articles, statements and newspaper columns, he had been an integral part of the party's Gramscian strategy.

The third and final author that I will mention is Ömer Laçiner, a former socialist revolutionary who has been part of the brain team of *Birikim* since its foundation. Laçiner, who hailed AKP's victory in 2002 as a "more extensive and profound revolution than that on 1946-1950"¹¹ (2002), was also among those who acknowledged that AKP had a significant amount of support from the new, organic intelligentsia while establishing its intellectual hegemony. In an article written following the 2007 elections, he claims that:

Should the AKP, in this second term in power, be able to transcend the plain socioeconomic interests of the class(es) that they represent, meaning if they would be able to act like a "mission party" which has been able to prioritize the will to transform Turkey into a country that has the fundamental values and standards of a civilized society; the moral and intellectual support of the aforementioned left-liberal intellectual society will surely continue. (Laçiner 2007)

Although Laçiner is not an established member of the academia as the previous writers examined in the paper, it is worth noting that as one of the editors-in-chief of *Birikim*, he was widely respected in the socialist community before being absorbed into the organic intelligentsia. Needless to say, he no longer is held in such high esteem within the community.

¹¹ On 1946, the Republic of Turkey had its first multi-party election. Since it was riddled with controversies, such as closed counting of the votes, several historians and political scientists argue that the elections of 1950, where the newly founded Democratic Party won against the Republican People's Party, were the first free elections in the country, according to liberal norms.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this paper, I attempted to briefly summarize how the new intelligentsia and the organic intellectual community have supported the AKP and Erdoğan while they were trying to enforce their hegemony over Turkish society, which, as the results of the latest presidential referendum and election have indicated¹², has ended with the complete establishment of the historical bloc. The support of these authors, that used to be widely respected in their communities, was unfortunately not limited to AKP's first two terms of government, they have also backed AKP before the referendum on 2010 which was about the reorganization of the judicial branch of the state.

Criminalizing any opposition to the proposed constitutional changes, the Birikim troika and their allies have used the similar Kemalist = authoritarian vs. AKP = liberal dichotomy to accuse anyone who disagreed with them as the obstacles against the democratization process of the country. Between AKP's second victory in 2007 and the end of the alliance on 2013, the *Birikim* crew had allied themselves with the writers of the journal, *Taraf* (Camp). *Taraf* was viewed by those who opposed AKP as an operation newspaper¹³, since it published several news reports and articles that led to lawsuits against AKP's fierce opponents, mostly the military. Further research on the role of both *Taraf* and *Birikim* in the hegemonic rise of AKP exists, notably

12 On April 2017, the Turkish population voted to change their political system from parliamentary democracy to a strong presidential system. The yes vote, heavily supported by Erdoğan and AKP, officially received 51.4% of the votes in the most controversial vote in the history of the country. One year later, on June 2018, the country went to the ballots again to elect its first president in the new system. Held once again in severely unreliable conditions that received worldwide criticism, Erdoğan won the election in the first round, officially receiving 52.6% of the votes.

13 The term operation newspaper was used to define the role of *Taraf* in manufacturing consent for the upcoming lawsuits against the army, the bureaucrats who were close to the military and the nationalist intellectuals. The opponents of AKP have claimed that by the use of this newspaper and the lawsuits that came with it, the role of the military as the watchman of democracy in Turkey was undermined, which led to the AKP being able to establish full control over the state apparatus. The newspaper was shut down by a decree on 2016, passed by the government of the same party

Hegemonya Yeniden Kurulurken Sol Liberalizm ve Taraf (Left Liberalism and Taraf During the Re-Establishment of Hegemony) by Aras Aladağ and *The Turkish AK Party and its Leader: Criticism, Opposition and Dissent*, edited by Ümit Cizre. The readers are encouraged to read these books and several other academic works that can be found on the Internet, should the topic interest them.

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