

Bonn Oriental and Asian Studies insights

Essay

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Source: BOAS insights, Vol. 2 (2023), pp. 5–25

Published by: BOAS insights | ISSN: 2748-5641 (Online)

Last edited: January 16, 2023

DOI: 10.48565/bonndoc-93

Cite this essay:

Gündüz, Zuhale Yeşilyurt. "Neoliberalism and Extractivism in Turkey."

BOAS insights 2 (2023): 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.48565/bonndoc-93>

Essay

Zuhal Yeşilyurt Gündüz*

Neoliberalism and Extractivism in Turkey

“Toprağın üstü **altından** değerlidir!” -

“What is above the earth is worth much more than what is **beneath!**”/

“What is above the earth is worth much more than **gold!**”¹

Abstract: This essay aims at revealing the connection between neoliberalism and extractivism in Turkey by focusing on gold extractivism. It begins with the conceptual background of neoliberalism and extractivism, then describes how neoliberalism met Turkey on January 24, 1980, and how it continued during the military regime and the following Turgut Özal regime. The essay will also demonstrate how the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) improved neoliberalism in Turkey. Finally, the essay will reveal how extractivism and especially gold extractivism has continued and increased and the harm that it has done to human and non-human populations, nature, and the environment.

Keywords: Turkey; Neoliberalism; Extractivism; Gold; Justice and Development Party (AKP); Growth Fetish

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¹ A famous slogan of environmental movements. In Turkish there is word play, as *altın* means gold and *alt* means underneath. It is a call to use what is above the soil (agriculture), and not to drag out what is beneath.

Introduction

Centered on free market economy with its continuing production and consumption chains, capitalism needs constant, steady growth to sustain itself. Further production and consumption are needed for growth, and they mutually reinforce each other. Whereas this system requires unlimited and infinite production and consumption, the essential natural resources are *not* unlimited and infinite. This is what ecological economist Herman Daly depicts as the “Impossibility Theorem” of limitless economic growth.² As the realization of this kind of economic growth, production, and consumption would deplete the earth’s resources, it is simply impossible.

Still, however, capitalism’s main imperative remains growth. Therefore, it is possible to speak of the nexus of capitalism’s crises of accumulation and inequality, which causes diverse national effects, including crisis of legitimacy within states. As to overcome the economic predicaments and to increase legitimacy, extractivism and authoritarianism are being applied by powerful, charismatic leaders. As an answer to the weakening economy, leaders opt for extractivist policies. When extraction does not suffice or worsens socio-economic problems, the next step to follow is authoritarianism. Thus, extractivism and authoritarian populism go hand in hand.³

Turkey is a significant example for rampant capitalism: a triumvirate of neoliberal economics and political authoritarianism mixed with Islamist conservatism. The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) has constructed the image of the “need to grow” and to “develop” and portrays extractivism as the way to continuing economic growth and the solution for economic predicaments. Thus, we witness former Prime-Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s coming to power and holding on to power as the nexus between authoritarian populism, extractivism and neoliberalism.⁴

This essay aims at providing an outlook at both neoliberalism and extractivism in Turkey. It first gives an outline of neoliberalism and a short history of Turkey’s 40 neoliberal years. The paper then aims to reveal the augmenting extractivism policies that lead to ever growing and nonrepairable destruction

² Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism: A Citizen’s Guide to Capitalism and the Environment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 7.

³ Fikret Adaman, Murat Arsel, and Bengi Akbulut, “Neoliberal Developmentalism, Authoritarian Populism, and Extractivism in the Countryside: The Soma Mining Disaster in Turkey,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 3 (2019): 516, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1515737>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 520.

of nature and environmental degradation. The focus will be on gold mines and gold extractivism. Notwithstanding the ecological and economic disaster that extractivism leads to, government and economic circles continue to construct extractivism as economically beneficial. Neither the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor global warming were able to make them rethink and slow them down. On the opposite side, environmentally destructive policies are on the rise.

Neoliberalism

The concept of 'neoliberalism' was developed within the economic context from ancient Greek *νέος neos*, 'new' and Latin *liberalis* 'concerning freedom' – *neos liberalis* – by the French politician Pierre Étienne Flandin in 1933. It is a heterogeneous flow of numerous schools and theorists like the Freiburger School (Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow, Walter Eucken, Franz Boehm), the Chicago School (Milton Friedman, Henry Simons, Irving Kristol) and the Austrian School (Friedrich August von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises). The Chicago School developed the core ideas of neoliberalism in the sense of supply-side economic policies. Ever since its launch, the term 'neoliberalism' has been an economic buzzword with negative connotations connected with market fundamentalism.⁵

With the end of the Second World War, Western European countries found "the social-democratic historical compromise that forced capital to adjust itself to the demands of social justice expressed by the working classes".⁶ It included the quest for full employment, Keynesian monetary and fiscal policies and social welfare not depending on the labor market, and was built upon industrial development, mass consumption, and social protection.

With the oil and economic crisis in the 1970s, the neoliberal project began with the process of re-establishing conditions for capital accumulation and restoration of class power of capital. In *A Neo-Liberal's Manifesto*, Charles Peters claimed that the 1970s revealed

[...] declining productivity; the closed factories and potholed roads that betrayed decaying plant and infrastructure; inefficient and unaccountable public agencies that were eroding confidence in government [...] Our primary concerns are commu-

⁵ Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 2 (June 2009): 141-46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-009-9040-5>.

⁶ Samir Amin, "U.S. Imperialism, Europe, and the Middle East," *Monthly Review – An Independent Socialist Magazine* 56, no. 6 (November 2004): chap. 5, https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-056-06-2004-10_2.

nity, democracy, and prosperity. Of them, economic growth is most important now, because it is essential to almost everything else we want to achieve.⁷

The prioritizing of prosperity and economic growth above everything is the main difference of neoliberalism. All else loses its importance. As long as it serves economic growth everything is allowed, everything is possible, and everything can be made.

What's more is the belief that *all* social, economic, and political predicaments can be addressed with fast economic growth. Neoliberal developmentalism easily uses state power whenever necessary to attain and sustain economic growth, and disregards any costs, such as depletion of natural resources, ecological degradation and pollution, waning of democratic values and norms, harsh suppression of social resistance movements, etc.⁸

Neoliberalism was initiated in Chile in 1973 after the US-led military *coup d'état* against the democratically elected socialist president and the creation of a military dictatorship. This turn from Keynesianism to neoliberalism – named 'Reaganism' in the USA and 'Thatcherism' in the UK – after the economic crisis of 1973, aimed at boosting capital accumulation and was a farewell to Keynesian principles of planning, regulation, controlling and management. Neoliberalism was represented in the Washington Consensus in 1989 and dispersed by financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.⁹ The neoliberal promise to bring wealth and economic development through deregulation, liberalization, and privatization has come true for giant national and international corporations, not, however, for the common people.¹⁰ Claudia von Werlhof states: "While a tiny minority reaps enormous benefits from today's economic liberalism, the vast majority of the earth's human and non-human population, and the earth itself suffer hardship to an extent that puts their very survival at risk. The damage done seems irreversible."¹¹

As for neoliberalism, economic growth comes first, and everything is subordinated to it, including nature. From the beginning, nature has been involved in the production of capitalist value, either as raw material input to production, as a product as the result of production, or as trade in natural assets. Nature was seen as an element of capital accumulation even in the theory of property

⁷ Charles Peters, "A Neo-Liberal's Manifesto," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 1982.

⁸ Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut, "Neoliberal Developmentalism," 519.

⁹ Wil Hout, "The Only Game in Town? European Social Democracy and Neo-liberal Globalisation," *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2/2006 (2006): 10–11.

¹⁰ Claudia von Werlhof, "The Globalization of Neoliberalism, Its Consequences, and Some of its Basic Alternatives," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 19, no. 3 (September 2008): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455750802348903>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

advocated by liberal John Locke three centuries ago. In this respect then, it needs to be asked what is new today and why there is a need for the “neoliberalization of nature”.¹²

The United Nations Stockholm Environment Conference and the accumulation crises of capitalism in the 1970s coincided around the same period. In the years following the conference, environmental protection was gradually becoming a universally accepted value and principle. Thus, the environment ceased to be the free property as envisaged by liberalism. In the debate on whether environmental protection should be carried out by state intervention or by market actors, liberal/neoliberal writers advocate the privatization of ecological assets and the commercialization of those that cannot be privatized. With the privatization and commercialization of nature, the neoliberalization of nature begins with new state regulations that increasingly see the environment as part of free market relations. By this, ecological assets that previously were not subject to private ownership and trade now are turned into products, goods, and investment objects for market actors in the process of the neoliberalization of nature. Besides, calls and demands for the protection of environment and nature are being answered by claims to do exactly this via commercialization and privatization. The more nature deserves and needs to be saved and protected, the more nature heads towards depletion and destruction, and the higher is its market value; thus, its attractiveness for companies.¹³

David Harvey’s significant concept of the theory of “accumulation by dispossession” depicts how capitalism applies power to deprive people and nature from value due to its unsatisfiable lust for profit.¹⁴ While nature is being commodified and captured by capital, its protection and privatization simultaneously are in the hands and responsibility of the state.¹⁵

¹² Aykut Çoban, Fevzi Özlüer and Sinan Erensü, “Türkiye’de Doğanın Neoliberalleşmesi ve Bu Sürece Karşı Mücadeleler” (“The Neoliberalization of Nature in Turkey and Resistances against this Process”), in *Yerel Yönetim, Kent ve Ekoloji (Regional Government, City and Ecology)*, ed. Aykut Çoban (Ankara: İmge Kitapevi, 2015), 401.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 400–1.

¹⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159: “These include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations [...]; conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights [...]; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession”.

¹⁵ Çoban, Özlüer and Erensü, “Türkiye’de Doğanın Neoliberalleşmesi,” 400–2.

Extractivism

Henry Veltmeyer and James Petras¹⁶ define extractivism as extraction of more and more natural resources and export of these primary goods for economic ‘development’ and ‘growth’, whilst ignoring its health, social, and environmental detriments. Extractivism looks back at a history of five hundred years, when the colonizers structured their model around the raw materials, they ‘discovered’ there and subsequently robbed. The natural resources-hungry and insatiable capitalist centers have presented extractivist accumulation as a requirement and necessity.

Alberto Acosta emphasizes “the resource curse” and “the paradox of plenty”. He also highlights the fact that the multinational corporations always are the “major beneficiaries of these activities”.¹⁷ Extractivism is more than resource extraction as it is “today’s imperialist plundering”, disguised as a development model.¹⁸

Neoliberalism Meets Turkey

Neoliberalism entered Turkey as early as January 24, 1980 when the then ruling center-right Justice Party government introduced severe economic restructuring steps that were built upon privatization, liberalization, deregulation, decreasing state control on economics, capital accumulation and export support, turning the state into a mere servant of capital, while opening Turkish economy to unlimited foreign capital penetration.¹⁹ This undermined the importance of local and rural actors and boosted the international financial institutions’ roles, especially the World Bank and IMF. One of the ‘must do’s’ was the elimination of agricultural subsidies, promoted as the only way to increase efficiency.²⁰

Thus, the move from developmentalist programs and policies to neoliberalism augmented the role and growth of transnational corporations in Turkey to

¹⁶ James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *The New Extractivism. A Post-Neoliberal Development Model or Imperialism of the Twenty-First Century?* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2014), 42, 44.

¹⁷ Alberto Acosta, “Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse,” in *Beyond Development. Alternative Visions from Latin America*, ed. Miriam Lang and Dunia Mokrani (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2013), 61, 67, https://www.tni.org/files/download/beyond-development_complete.pdf.

¹⁸ As Cristóbal Kay puts it in the blurb for Petras and Veltmeyer, *The New Extractivism*.

¹⁹ Nilgün Önder, “The Turkish Political Economy: Globalization and Regionalism,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6 (2007): 231–33.

²⁰ Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut, “Neoliberal Developmentalism,” 9.

the detriment of the local population and led to the internationalization of agriculture. The pressures of the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization, European Union and the United States led to the elimination of subventions and the end of parastatal organizations in Turkey. While Turkey had hoped for further integration into global markets and economy, this enabled the transnational corporations a stronger standing in the country. When Turkey was made to sign the Staff Monitored Program with the IMF in 1998, deep institutional modifications resulted in the further internationalization of agriculture, which led to de-agrarianization and de-peasantization, with huge impoverishment and destitution among the rural people and areas.²¹ All this eventually led to profound institutional transformations and the unmet needs of farmers and peasants in Turkey in addition to the disregard for food security.

The military junta, ruling Turkey from September 12, 1980 onwards for three years furthered the neoliberal regime and enabled more transformations deemed necessary. Although the EU and the USA criticized the increasing demolition of democracy in Turkey, the strengthening of the neoliberal system by the military regime satisfied the aspirations of capitalist powers. Workers' rights were undermined, trade unions constrained, and an export-oriented economy was further advanced. With the return to a civilian government, the neoliberal system was developed under Turgut Özal's Motherland Party, 1983 to 1993. The neoliberal system itself fostered one economic crisis after the next: 1994, 1999, 2001, 2008–2009, 2018, 2020, 2021-continuing. All these crises proved that neoliberalism was hazardous and volatile but instead of leading to a reverse, neoliberalism was promoted even more by the crises it had generated itself.²²

Turkey's economy exposes two dilemmas. The first is the "perverse and rather premature neo-liberal development"²³ that made it impossible to balance liberalization with reconciliation of its severe effects on the population via regulations for healthy development. The second is Turkey's legacy of populism and patronage that made necessary but difficult to enforce reforms impossible to be realized. Political breakdown, military interventions, tense coalition governments and frequent elections led to further populist policies.

²¹ Zülküf Aydın, "Neo-Liberal Transformation of Turkish Agriculture," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, no. 2 (April 2010): Introduction, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2009.00241.x>.

²² Pınar Bedirhanoglu, "Restrukturierung des türkischen Staates im Kontext der neoliberalen Globalisierung," in *Perspektiven auf die Türkei. Ökonomische und gesellschaftliche (Dis)kontinuitäten im Kontext der Europäisierung*, ed. Ilker Ataç, Bülent Küçük, and Ulaş Şener (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2008), 111.

²³ Mine Eder, "Implementing the Economic Criteria of EU Membership: How Difficult Is It for Turkey?" *Turkish Studies* 4, no.1 (2003): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714005711>.

Turkey's model of capital accumulation since 1980 and increasingly during the AKP-regime had been via quick rentier accumulation with the commodification of space and commons in the construction, energy and extractivism sectors.²⁴ With its imperative to grow, Turkey's neoliberal capitalist model, based on economic growth, triggered a relentless drive for ever-increasing capital accumulation and growth irrespective of their social, health or ecological costs. Therefore, neoliberal policies, including privatization, commercialization, deregulation, harmed nature and led to increasing environmental degradation and pollution, due to overuse of natural resources, and waste production and disposal.²⁵

Neoliberalism and the AKP Regime

Neoliberalism was not only continued but made 'perfect' by the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) after 2002, who married Islamist populism with neoliberalism.²⁶ The AKP turned the state into a promoter and accomplice of neoliberalism with all its dogmas as well as the guardian of private capital and the capitalist class. As to appeal to popular classes and their votes, AKP connected traditional religious values with liberal ones such as globalization. AKP's cultural-religious conservatism's key is Islam itself and it epitomizes the nexus between Islam and neoliberalism. Finance and capital driven growth, austerity policies, privatization, commodification of formerly public services and lands, declining living standards, wage cuts, cheap labor, a high trade deficit, reduction of real production while Turkey became dependent on importing capital goods, energy, and agricultural goods – these are applauded as 'growth' and 'development'.²⁷ The AKP regime enables enormous rent gains (easy, effortless, quickly earned money) via commodification and commercialization of the

²⁴ Korkut Boratav, "Korkut Boratav, Gezi Direnişini değerlendirdi: 'Olgunlaşmış bir sınıfsal başkaldırı...'" ("Korkut Boratav Evaluates the Gezi Resistance: 'A Mature Class Revolt...')", interview by Özyay Göztepe, *Sendika*, June 22, 2013, <https://sendika.org/2013/06/her-yer-taksim-her-yer-direnis-bu-isci-sinifinin-tarihsel-ozlemi-olan-sinirsiz-dolaysiz-demokrasi-cagrisidir-korkut-boratav-120919/>.

²⁵ Defne Gönenç, "Litigation as a Strategy for Environmental Movements Questioned: An Examination of Bergama and Artvin-Cerattepe Struggles," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 2 (2022): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.2006004>.

²⁶ Simten Coşar and Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir, "Introduction", in *Silent Violence: Neoliberalism, Islamist Politics and the AKP Years in Turkey*, ed. Simten Coşar and Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir (Ottawa: Red Quill, 2012), 9–11.

²⁷ T. Sabri Öncü, "The Standing Man of Turkey," Counterpunch, published June 21, 2013, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/06/21/the-standing-man-of-turkey/>.

commons. Rivers, mountains, farmland, historical buildings, woodlands, forests, gardens, parks, seas – nothing is safe from commodification and privatization. This sale of public, common land reached tremendous levels during the AKP regime. Policies of deregulation and commodification of rural and urban areas have been taken to the extreme. The revisions made on the Public Procurement Law that regulates the awarding of state contracts are taken to the extreme. In 2018, a news source stated that the AKP in its 187 months of rule had changed the Public Procurement Law 186 times.²⁸ The same trend continues today with decreasing transparency.²⁹ The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Regulation entered into force in 1993. By 2015, it had been amended 17 times, with seven of these being fundamental changes. For a comparison, by 2015, the European Union's 1985 EIA Directive had been amended only three times. Aykut Çoban, Fevzi Özlüer and Sinan Erensü prepared a chart revealing that more than half of the legislative changes took place after 2003 and were thus realized by the AKP governments. In this time period, the Forest Law had been amended 24 times since 1956, with 12 revisions in the first 12 years of AKP-rule. Frequently changing legislation, mostly to ease work for corporations on costs of nature and environment, makes it impossible to follow the many changes in regulations for citizens, and has limiting effects on the realization of legal control.³⁰

Contracts awarded by open auction dropped from 100,820 in the year 2005 down to 65,016 in 2014, while contracts were increasingly awarded with discretion, behind closed doors, favoring some while leaving out others. This leaves huge space for corruption, which by now has nearly become 'normalized'. "A new class has been on the rise since 2002, the Islamist *nouveau riche*: businesses that use religion to form connections with the government."³¹

As a critique of AKP's direct interference to secure and enrich its advocates, regarding private-public-partnership-funded under-used but highly paid-for bridges, highways, private hospitals, the opposition Republican People's Party

²⁸ Nurcan Gökdemir, "İhale Kanunu 187 ayda 186 kere değiştirildi" ("The Procurement Law Was Changed 186 Times in 187 Months"), *Birgün*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/ihale-kanunu-187-ayda-186-kere-degistirildi-216485>.

²⁹ "2002'den bu yana 191 kez değişen Kamu İhale Kanunu bu kez sil baştan değişiyor" ("The Public Procurement Law That Has Been Changed 191 Times since 2002, Will Be Totally Revised"), *Independent Türkçe*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.indytrk.com/node/420056/ekonomi%C3%87/2002den-bu-yana-191-kez-de%C4%9Fi%C5%9Fen-kamu-i%C3%87hale-kanunu-bu-kez-sil-ba%C5%9Ftan-de%C4%9Fi%C5%9Fiyor>.

³⁰ Çoban, Özlüer and Erensü, "Türkiye'de Doğanın Neoliberalleşmesi," 425–26.

³¹ Thomas Helm, "How Neoliberal Is Turkey?" *The Turkey Analyst*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/596-how-neoliberal-is-turkey?.html>.

stated: “This [...] is not about people. It is about making AKP supporters rich.”³² These megaprojects enrich the loyal Islamist *nouveau riche* and construct a fake image of a strong, rich, modernizing, developing country model to the world in general and AKP voters in particular.

This “merciless growth” surrenders everything – humans, nature, environment, and the commons for the “absolute fetish of economic growth”.³³ Cities are opened up to the services of capital and look like construction areas. Huge skyscrapers, shopping malls, bridges, airports, nuclear plants, hydroelectric and thermal power plants, gold mines and other projects constitute Turkey’s ‘development’. Nature and humans pay the price for this type of ‘growth’ with their health or even with their lives, aside from the environmental destruction.

If ‘necessary’ the AKP-government does not shy away from using its power to boost its favored industries, such as the mining and construction industries.³⁴ Neoliberal developmentalism centers on extractivism and the construction industry, which are both connected to the energy sector; and decreases the value and importance given to other sectors such as that of agriculture. As a result of this, all over the country peasants and farmers have been pushed out of farming and into working in these extractivist mines or the construction sector with low workplace safety standards. Following the neoliberal imperative to economic growth, increased production and productivity was prioritized over everything else. The workers were thus forced to work mostly for minimum wage under extremely harsh and dangerous, life-threatening conditions as they “did not have much to rely on to counter neoliberal policies that have been transforming their rural lives and offering them jobs in the extractives sector.”³⁵

It is possible to state that the COVID-19 pandemic made the neoliberalist drive even more intense as pauperized peasants, farmers, and workers had to decide whether to (continue to) work in the extractivism sectors or suffer larger poverty. Many spoke out clearly: “We will not die due to the virus, but due to starvation”; “We will die either through the virus or through starvation”.³⁶ Thus, they had to choose between not working in the mines and dying of starvation today or working in the mines and dying of environmental degradation tomorrow.

³² Helm, “How Neoliberal Is Turkey?”.

³³ Halil Gurhanli, “Mass Murder in Soma Mine: Crony Capitalism and Fetish of Growth in Turkey,” *Politikasta*, June 9, 2014, <https://politikasta.fi/en/mass-murder-in-soma-mine-crony-capitalism-and-fetish-of-growth-in-turkey-2/>.

³⁴ Göneç, “Litigation as a Strategy,” 309.

³⁵ Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut, “Neoliberal Developmentalism,” 516.

³⁶ Sibel Gülersöyler, “Coronadan değil açlıktan öleceğiz” (“We Will Not Die due to Corona, but due to Starvation”), *Sözcü*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/Istanbul-da-kafe-ve-bar-calisanlarindan-sessiz-eylem-coronadan-degil-acliktan-olecegiz-6153911/>.

Increasing Authoritarianism

For Turkey, Soma stands as a symbol of rampant neoliberal and deadly capitalism.³⁷ Soma, in the Aegean province of Manisa, once had great farming land and was rich in agriculture. With a state decision, agricultural subsidies were stopped for this region in the 1990s, leading many to give up farming and migrate to the cities. Soma was made into a lignite coal-mining hub, leading to immense environmental degradation. Thousands of former farmers were coerced to mine under extremely dangerous conditions. In 2005 the mine had been privatized, leading to a decrease in production costs from \$130 to \$24 per one ton of coal by 2012, due to reductions in wages and lack of investment in safety measures. Most of the mine workers were temporary or unregistered and therefore not sufficiently trained and equipped, with some even being underage. On May 13, 2014, a tragic disaster cost the lives of 301 mine workers in Soma's coal-mine. Clearly this was not an 'accident' but "one of the greatest workplace murders in Turkish history."³⁸ Soma "was not a random accident; it was the direct consequence of a decade of neoliberalization."³⁹

Following the Soma disaster, the AKP regime hardened its position by increasing its authoritarianism. As to reinforce its declining legitimacy, the AKP applied both authoritarian populism, including coercion to maintain total control and state rule, *and* extractivism as the means to economic growth, which became ever more pressing, as it made possible to continue the distribution of populist material concessions.⁴⁰ Extractivism – notwithstanding its unsustainability – can indeed, at least for a brief period of time, "create the illusion of dynamic economic growth."⁴¹ By forming new connections between the state and corporations, the speed and scope of commodity extraction was boosted, leading to short term economic growth and employment in these sectors. The AKP created precarity, poverty and pauperization and then provided short-term, temporary solutions in the form of precarious, dangerous, cheap work; thus, "the type of policies enabled by extractivism are populist mainly because

³⁷ Zuhul Yeşilyurt Gündüz, "The 'New Turkey': Fetishizing Growth with Fatal Results," *Monthly Review – An Independent Socialist Magazine* 67, no. 2 (June 2015), https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-067-02-2015-06_3.

³⁸ "Turkey's Neoliberal Death Toll: Hundreds of Miners Died in Great Soma Massacre," *Sendika*, May 14, 2014, <https://sendika.org/2014/05/turkeys-neoliberal-death-roll-hundreds-of-miner-died-in-great-soma-massacre-189942/>.

³⁹ Pieter Verstraete, "Turkey Coalmine Disaster: Accident or Murder?" *Roarmag*, Capitalism & Crisis, May 14, 2014, <https://roarmag.org/essays/turkey-soma-coalmine-disaster/>.

⁴⁰ Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut, "Neoliberal Developmentalism," 517.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 519.

they do not aim at genuine socio-economic transformation.”⁴² Another transformation has indeed been realized. Looking at Turkey, it is possible to state that “Erdoğan gradually dismantled the neoliberal regulatory architecture, paving the way for an inchoate and personalistic but ultimately dirigiste presidential system.”⁴³

With the increasing recognition of the social problems and environmental degradation caused by extractivist policies, social movements of resistance have made their voices heard. The leading example of this is the Gezi resistance, which took place from May to June 2013 for environmental protection and human liberties and against governmental plans to demolish Gezi (the public park) to build a shopping mall there. The resistance soon grew into the largest anti-government protests Turkey has ever witnessed.⁴⁴ Other examples of well-organized environmental resistance movements followed as a result of social and environmental costs of AKP’s neoliberal extractivist policies.⁴⁵ Most of these resistances were tracked down more or less violently: “Only those in power still have rights. [...] Those who get in their way or challenge their ‘rights’ are vilified, criminalized and to an increasing degree defined as ‘terrorists.’”⁴⁶

Two examples for this vilification process can be given in the Bergama and Gezi resistances. Bergama, in the Aegean city of Izmir, was the first gold mine of Turkey. The Bergama movement has fought against gold mining and the use of cyanide acid for extracting gold there since the 1990s.⁴⁷ Taking legal action, the Bergama movement applied to the Council of State and went as high as the European Court of Human Rights. However, “although initially judgment by the Council of State in Bergama scared-off other gold-mining investors, the non-implementation of this decision in the long-term and the only monetary fines imposition by the ECtHR further encouraged the investors to pressure for mining projects.”⁴⁸ Thus, even with positive court judgements for the activists, it was not possible to reach environmental justice; “due to robust limitations to

⁴² Adaman, Arsel, and Akbulut, “Neoliberal Developmentalism,” 519.

⁴³ Sinan Erenşü and Yahya M. Madra, “Neoliberal Politics in Turkey”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, ed. by Güneş Murat Tezcür (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chap. Neoliberal Triumphalism: Responding to the Crisis of the 1990s.

⁴⁴ Ash Iğsız, “Brand Turkey and the Gezi Protests: Authoritarianism, Law, and Neoliberalism (Part One),” *Jadaliyya*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29078>; Matze Kasper, “To Survive, the Movement Will Have to Compromise,” *Roarmag*, January 11, 2014, <https://roarmag.org/essays/media-gezi-park-protests/>.

⁴⁵ Gönenç, “Litigation as a Strategy,” 309.

⁴⁶ Von Werlhof, “The Globalization of Neoliberalism,” 112.

⁴⁷ Aykut Çoban, “Community-based Ecological Resistance: The Bergama Movement in Turkey,” *Environmental Politics* 13, no. 2 (2004): 442–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964401042000209658>.

⁴⁸ Gönenç, “Litigation as a Strategy,” 315–16.

the effective delivery of environmental justice through courts, similar injustices are repeated, and environmentally destructive projects continue.”⁴⁹

The second example is the controversial Gezi Park verdict from April 5, 2022 that sentenced philanthropist Osman Kavala to a life sentence without parole for “attempting to overthrow the government by force” for ‘organizing’ the 2013 Gezi protests. Seven other activists were sentenced to 18 years for purportedly assisting Kavala. Ever since the Gezi protests, Erdoğan had frequently depicted the protests as an uprising to topple the government.⁵⁰

Sinan Erensü and Yahya M. Madra state it openly: “The never-ending mass-mobilization campaigns accompanied by a ferocious crack down on civil liberties as well as the lockdown of political dissidents amounts to an ongoing state of emergency and diminishing social trust [...]. In an interesting twist of fate, the adventure of neoliberal politics in Turkey began with a military coup and a state of emergency and today, if it is coming to an end, it is happening in a de facto state of emergency where President Erdoğan exerts unprecedented levels of executive power. Yet his refashioning of the Turkish state as a corporation where his presidency functions as the seat of a chief executive officer (CEO) could also be construed as the apotheosis of the ultimate neoliberal dream: the complete submission of the state to the rule of markets.”⁵¹

Neoliberalism makes for a strange bedfellow. It is this neoliberal style of privatization, deregulation and wage declines that makes Turkey profitable for Western capital. President Erdoğan and his AKP have been fulfilling the wildest dreams of the IMF, World Bank, the USA, and the EU with wage and pension cuts, privatization of state-owned enterprises and commodification. James Petras states: “Erdoğan’s combination of Islam with brutal neo-liberalism attracted support from Brussels, Wall Street and the City of London. Large inflows of speculative foreign capital temporarily inflated Turkey’s Gross National Product (GNP) and Erdoğan’s wealth and ego!”⁵²

The AKP’s neoliberal program is built upon continuous economic growth, and therefore the government increasingly resists, omits and neglects workers’ safety regulations. The Workers Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSİG) provides data on workers who died while working, on their way to the job, and due

⁴⁹ Gönenc, “Litigation as a Strategy,” 315–16.

⁵⁰ Berk Esen, “What Does the Gezi Trial Tell Us about Erdoğan’s Regime in Turkey?” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Publications, published May 9, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/what-does-the-gezi-trial-tell-us-about-erdogans-regime-in-turkey>.

⁵¹ Erensü and Madra, “Neoliberal Politics,” chap. W(h)ither Neoliberalism? The Neomercantilist Turn and Rise of Corporate Nationalism.

⁵² James Petras, “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Portrait of a Backstabbing Neoliberal Pasha,” Global Research, published December 16, 2015, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/recep-tayyip-erdogan-portrait-of-a-backstabbing-neoliberal-pasha/5496081>.

to diseases caused by the work they do.⁵³ What is shocking is the continuous increase in work-related deaths. In 2003, 811 workers died, while in 2021 it was 2,170. So far, the record year was the COVID-19 year of 2020, with 2,427 workers reportedly having died while working. Turkey ranks first in Europe (eight-and-a-half times higher than the EU average) and third globally in workplace accidents – all in the name of ‘growth’.⁵⁴

Gold Extractivism

Across Turkey there are 19 gold mines currently at work, with more being planned by the AKP.⁵⁵ Gold extraction equals long-lasting poisoning. The “use of low-cost cyanide heap leaching techniques to recover metal from ores has allowed miners to profitably extract gold deposits. The chemical compound has on occasion been mishandled, and in some locations releases have created environmental problems.”⁵⁶ Here gold is being gained by the most primitive way possible, heap leaching, the process used by mining companies to separate gold from ore, which damages the surrounding environment. Heap leaching is a process that uses a cyanide solution to dissolve the gold and extract it from its

⁵³ See the website of the Workers Health and Safety Labour Watch, <https://www.isigmeclisi.org/>.

⁵⁴ Year: death numbers: 2003: 811, 2013: 1,235, 2014: 1,886, 2015: 1,730, 2016: 1,970, 2017: 2,006, 2018: 1,923, 2019: 1,736, 2020: 2,427, 2021: 2,170. Between January and October 2022, 1,521 workers died at work. In the 20 years of AKP rule at least 30,224 workers died at work. Data taken from <https://www.isigmeclisi.org/>.

⁵⁵ İbrahim Gündüz, *Altın Ölüm (Gold Death)* (Ankara: Galeati Yayınları, 2022), 102. The gold mines that are at work, the mining companies and the starting year are as follows: 1) Ovacık Altın Madeni | İzmir/Bergama | Koza Altın | 2001; 2) Sart Altın Madeni | Manisa/Sart | Pomza | 2002; 3) Kışladağ Altın Madeni | Uşak/Eşme | El Dorado Gold/TÜPRAG Madencilik, Kanada | 2006; 4) Mastra Altın Madeni | Gümüşhane | Koza Altın | 2009; 5) Çukuralan Altın Madeni | İzmir | Koza Altın | 2009; 6) Çöpler Altın Madeni | Erzincan/İliç | Anagold – SSR MİNING (Alacer) Kanada/Lidya (Çalık) | 2010; 7) Efem Çukuru Altın Madeni | İzmir | El Dorado Gold/TÜPRAG Madencilik, Kanada | 2011; 8) Kaymaz Altın Madeni | Eskişehir | Koza Altın | 2011; 9) Bolkardağ Altın Madeni | Niğde | Gümüştaş Madencilik | 2012; 10) Midi Altın Madeni | Gümüşhane | Yıldızbakkır | 2012; 11) Himmetdede Altın Madeni | Kayseri | Koza Altın | 2013; 12) Fatsa Altın Madeni | Ordu | Altintepe madencilik | Bahar/Stratex|Oriole/Cominco | 2015; 13) Bakırtepe Altın İşletmesi | Sivas | Koç/Demir Export | 2015; 14) Kaş Altın Madeni | Kayseri | Koç/Demir Export | 2016; 15) İnce Altın Madeni | Konya | Eczacıbaşı/Esan | 2016; 16) Kızıltepe Altın Madeni | Balıkesir | Zenit Altın | El Dorado Gold | 2017; 17) Lapseki Altın Madeni | Çanakkale | Nurol/Tümad Madencilik | 2018; 18) İvrindi Altın Madeni | Balıkesir | Nurol/Tümad Madencilik | 2019; 19) Öksüt Altın Madeni | Kayseri/Öksüt | Öksüt Madencilik/Centerra | 2020.

⁵⁶ Jan G. Laitos, “The Current Status of Cyanide Regulations,” *Engineering and Mining Journal*, Features, Published February 2012. <https://www.e-mj.com/features/the-current-status-of-cyanide-regulations/>.

ore.⁵⁷ Cyanide can leak into and thus pollute local dams, waters, rivers, and soil. Life will not be the same after the environment is poisoned by cyanide.

Many accidents have happened in the past on a global scale where cyanide entered soil and water flows, killing humans and animals, and damaging the environment.⁵⁸ One of the deadliest accidents happened in 1971 in Romania when the Certej gold mine waste dam exploded and 300,000 cubic meters of poisoned water flooded to the district of Certeju de Sus, killing 89 people. Also in Romania, in January of the year 2000, in the Baia Mare gold mine the cyanide pool broke down due to heavy rain and cyanide toxic waste waters flooded to the Danube River, poisoning the drinking water of 2 million people. This was the second largest environmental disaster in Europe after the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. Although the corporations assure how “safe and secure” this system is and pretend nothing bad will happen, global evidence proves these to be lies.⁵⁹

Many countries have suffered consequences as a result of these disasters. Europe applies a very low-level limit on cyanide use with Directive 2006/21/EC. Mines built after May 2008 are prohibited from discharging waste with over 10 ppm (parts per million) WAD (weak acid dissociable) cyanide, while mines built before that date may not waste more than 50 ppm at the outset, decreasing to 25 ppm in 2013 and 10 ppm in 2018.⁶⁰ Operators of mines are obliged to guarantee cleaning after the completion of work at the mine.⁶¹

Following the Baia Mare disaster, the European Union took the necessary steps to revise the EU Mining Waste Directive and the EU Water Framework Directive. In many EU member states gold production through cyanide leaching was criticized and debated, resulting in the banning of cyanide mining in the Czech Republic in 2000, Germany in 2002 and Hungary in 2009.⁶² On the fifth

⁵⁷ Catherine Bennett and Ilgin Yorulmaz, “Canadian Gold Mine in Turkey Sparks Environmental Protests,” *The Observers*, August 7, 2019, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20190807-turkey-protesters-canadian-gold-mining-alamos-kirazli>.

⁵⁸ Gündüz, *Altın Ölüm*, 39–50; see also: Ronald Eisler and Stanley N. Wiemeyer, “Cyanide Hazards to Plants and Animals from Gold Mining and Related Water Issues,” *Reviews of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology* 183 (2004): 21–54; Friedhelm Korte, Michael Spiteller and Friedrich Coulston, “The Cyanide Leaching Gold Recovery Process Is a Nonsustainable Technology with Unacceptable Impacts on Ecosystems and Humans,” *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety* 46, no. 3 (July 2000): 241–45; Friedhelm Korte and Frederick Coulston, “Some Considerations on the Impact on Ecological Chemical Principles in Practice with Emphasis on Gold Mining and Cyanide,” *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety* 41, no. 2 (October 1998): 119–29.

⁵⁹ Haluk Kalafat, “Türkiye’nin Siyanür Tehlike Haritası,” *bianet*, May 12, 2011, <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/cevre/129955-turkiye-nin-siyatur-tehlike-haritasi>.

⁶⁰ Laitos, “The Current Status of Cyanide Regulations”.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gündüz, *Altın Ölüm*, 53–54.

of May, 2010, the European Parliament passed its resolution on a general ban of the use of cyanide mining technologies in the European Union.⁶³

In order to make one ounce of gold (31 gram) – the amount of a golden ring – gold diggers must extract between 30 to 50 tons of rock from mountains⁶⁴ Even before that, a huge amount of beautiful, life-bearing trees is to be cut down. This destruction harms the environment in an irreparable way, as the rock is being crushed out of the mountains, crumbled down in tiny little pieces with dynamite and finally scattered on the bare soil. Then, the leaching process using cyanide begins. Cyanide, one of the world's most toxic and deadliest chemicals, is passed through these tiny pieces of rocks. This procedure enables the division of the rock into 'useless' sediment left behind and the object of desire: gold. This gold is then liquified and re-solidified through a process that includes the further use of toxic materials. In some of the larger mines, half a million tons of soil and rock are dismantled every day and piled up. International companies and compradors in Turkey make huge gains from extracting gold deposits with cyanide heap leaching. Whatever life used to exist there in those mountains, forests, lands, is never to be seen again.

Another interesting point is that in 1997 the Turkish Council of State had forbidden gold production with cyanide leaching by law on the basis of Article 56 in the Turkish Constitution that ensures the right of the people to live in a healthy and balanced environment and gives the state and the citizens the duty to improve and protect the environment.⁶⁵ However, due to intense lobbying by the international mining corporation, Eurogold, this lifesaving law was changed on 13 August 1999 in order to bring direct foreign investment to Turkey. This constitutional reform eliminated the above-mentioned law and

⁶³ "European Parliament Resolution of 5 May 2010 on a General Ban on the Use of Cyanide Mining Technologies in the European Union," European Parliament, published May 5, 2010, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2010-0145_EN.html: "1. Considers that compliance with the EU's objectives under the Water Framework Directive, namely to achieve good chemical status for water resources and to protect water resources and biological diversity, can be achieved only by banning cyanide mining technology; 2. Calls on the Commission to propose a complete ban on the use of cyanide mining technologies in the European Union before the end of 2011, since this is the only safe way to protect our water resources and ecosystems against cyanide pollution from mining activities, and to carry out an ordinary impact assessment at the same time; 3. Takes note of the relevant initiatives within the EU and the UN systems and strongly encourages the development and application of safer – in particular cyanide-free – mining alternatives; 4. Calls on the Commission and the Member States not to support, either directly or indirectly, any mining projects in the EU that involve cyanide technology until the general ban is applicable, nor to support any such projects in third countries".

⁶⁴ Gündüz, *Altın Ölüm*, 32–33; 167.

⁶⁵ Laitos, "The Current Status of Cyanide Regulations".

opened all the natural resources of Turkey to multinational monopolies.⁶⁶ One should note that this change in law/constitution took place before the AKP.

The Mining Law, originating from the 1865 Ottoman Law, *Dilaver Paşa Nizamnamesi*,⁶⁷ was altered for the first time by the then Prime Minister Turgut Özal of the Motherland Party, who in 1985 opened the state-based mining industry to domestic and foreign capital.⁶⁸ Under the AKP this rule has been revised 21 times – that is more than one revision per ruling year. All the changes led to easier and arbitrary distribution of licenses instead of the conservation of natural resources and supervision of mining activities.⁶⁹

All these changes were to the advantage of global/international mining corporations and to the detriment of the environment and the local people. While ever-growing groups protest and demonstrate against this selling off of land and soil, the government is quick in claiming that these mining facilities would develop the economy and create jobs. Only a few people actually work in gold mines, which function for around 8 to 16 years, and the income from gold is taken mostly by the foreign mining corporations.⁷⁰ People are left with little more than a destroyed natural environment.

Concluding Words

It is the responsibility of the state to save its people, not to poison them. Article 56 of the Turkish Constitution states:

Everyone has the right to live in a healthy and balanced environment. It is the duty of the State and citizens to improve the natural environment, to protect the environmental health and to prevent environmental pollution.⁷¹

⁶⁶ “Bergama gerçeği ve siyanürlü altın madenciliği” (“The Bergama reality of cyanide gold mining”), Geological Engineers Chamber Turkey, Head office, published July 21, 2005, https://www.jmo.org.tr/genel/bizden_detay.php?kod=30#.XeQF2ugzaUm.

⁶⁷ Remzi Özmen, “1865 Tarihli Dilaver Paşa Nizamnamesinden 1985 Tarihli Maden Kanununa...” (“From the 1865 Dilaver Pasha Order Rule to the 1985 Mining Law...”), *Terazi Hukuk Dergisi* 9, no. 94 (June 2014): 82–83. <https://www.jurix.com.tr/article/2308>.

⁶⁸ “Maden Kanunu” (“Mining Law”), Resmi Gazete, published June 15, 1985. <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=3213&MevzuatTur=1&MevzuatTertip=5>.

⁶⁹ Bahar Ünlü, “Maden Kanunu 21 kez kimler için, nasıl değişti?” (“For Whom and Why Was the Mining Law Changed 21 Times?”), *Gezegen 24*, May 4, 2021, <https://gezegen24.com/maden-kanunu-degisiklikleri/>.

⁷⁰ Miyase İlknur, “Kaz Dağları gerçeği: Bu vatana nasıl kıydınız?” (“The Reality of Ida Mountains: How Could You Do This to This Country?”), *Cumhuriyet*, August 11, 2019, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/yazi_dizileri/1530192/kaz-daglari-gercegi-bu-vatana-nasil-kiydiniz.html.

⁷¹ “Constitution of the Republic of Turkey,” Turkey, accessed September 26, 2022, https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf.

The legal text and the real life, however, differ fundamentally and there is a gap between the de jure stipulation and the de facto application. Although the constitution provides the “right to live in a healthy and balanced environment” and makes this the duty of state and citizens to protect and improve the environment in Turkey, environmental degradation proceeds at ever-faster speed and reaches health-threatening levels. This is an obligation and a responsibility that the state has failed to realize and keeps on failing to realize.

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