Everywhere Taksim

Toktamis, Kumru, David, Isabel

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Toktamis, Kumru and Isabel David.
Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66388.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66388

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2347394
Rebelling against Neoliberal Populist Regimes

Barış Alp Özden and Ahmet Bekmen

During the summer of 2013, Turkey and Brazil, two countries that are alleged success stories under the aegis of international financial institutions, experienced massive popular protests that erupted simultaneously against the respective ruling parties. In both cases, the protests broke out over relatively minor issues. In Turkey, the protests started out as a response to the governing neoliberal party’s project of urban transformation in Istanbul’s Taksim Square, while a hike in public transport fares in Brazil sparked street protests. However, these urban issues were quickly overtaken in both countries as the protests became massive uprisings that involved diverse social groups with different agendas.

Comparing these two cases is not only productive because of the similarities of the motivations and social composition of the protestors. For over a decade, the ruling parties in these countries have proved to be very successful in depoliticising the longstanding social problems of the country and closing off the possibility of any meaningful transformation of social relations. Unlike previous governance programmes determined by structural adjustment, the political strategies of AKP in Turkey and Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party, PT) in Brazil have helped them manage social tensions in new ways that bypass and further undermine ideas of representation and those institutional structures that have historically been linked to collective action and organisation.

Framed in these terms, we argue that the policies and the programmes instituted by AKP and PT represent a new form of politics that combine disciplinary neoliberalism with populist forms of governing. Such neoliberal populism shares some features with the populism of previous decades: a personalised and paternalistic pattern of political leadership, a multi-class coalition, an amorphous and eclectic ideology and the distribution of material gifts to consolidate political support (Roberts 1995, 88). However, neoliberal populism also differs in important ways. Firstly, as one prominent scholar of Turkey’s political economy suggests, it is a ‘controlled populism’ that steers the economy according to the neoliberal economic policy agenda set by international financial institutions (Öniş 2012). Secondly, while the analytical core of both ‘historical populism’ and neoliberal populism is
based on ‘the constitution of the people as a political actor’ (Panizza 2005, 3), neoliberal populism aims to create ‘new non-class forms of identity and representation that attempt to disarticulate social conflict from material relations of power and re-embed social relations within increasingly moralized notions of community’ (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004, 574). As Francisco de Oliveira (2007, 102), a prominent sociologist and founder of PT, clarifies:

Here, perhaps, we really do find ourselves face to face with a new populism, given the impossibility of any politics based on class organization [...] the new, actually existing populism represents the exclusion of class from politics. It is neither an exclusively Brazilian phenomenon nor is it of ideological origin – it stems from the disintegration of the working class, above all of its hard core, the industrial proletariat.

This feature of neoliberal populism, its forging of non-class forms of identity and representation, also explains its appeal to the most unorganised, dislocated segments of society; namely, the new urban poor and informal sector workers (cf. Weyland 2003).

The argument of the paper is developed in two parts. Part one briefly outlines the neoliberal transformation of these countries and then discusses the basic contours of AKP’s and PT’s neoliberal populism. The second part focuses on the social composition of the rebellions in Turkey and Brazil, with the intention of clarifying the social contradictions and limits of these regimes.

**Neoliberal Populism, AKP and PT**

AKP came to power in 2002 in the immediate aftermath of one of the most severe economic crises in Turkey’s history. During the previous decade, macroeconomic management was extremely difficult due to large budget and current account deficits, high inflation and low international reserves. With its boom and bust cycles, the Turkish economy was not able to increase the private investment that could have provided a sustained stimulus to the overall economy. In 2001, per capita income stood at the same level as in 1991, leading many scholars of the Turkish economy to describe the 1990s as ‘the lost decade.” Furthermore, the 1990s proved to be unstable in political

terms. The nine successive fragile coalition governments between 1991 and 2001, none of which lasted in office more than two years, lacked the political power to undertake any drastic economic measures that would hurt large segments of society. For many observers of the Turkish economy during the period, the ‘populist cycles’ of intense distributional pressures were directly associated with those weak and unstable coalition governments, despite the country’s need for structural reforms to curb the growing macroeconomic imbalances (see Öniş 2003; Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan 2000).

Once in power, AKP mainly continued with the preceding coalition government’s neoliberal macroeconomic strategy. In particular, the party adhered strictly to the prescriptions of the ongoing IMF programme, especially with regard to fiscal austerity and privatisation. While undoubtedly helped by a favourable global liquidity environment, the government was able to stabilise the economy, reduce inflation to single digit figures and fuel growth. This provided the opportunity for the party to generate deep-seated structural changes in Turkey’s welfare regime, together with the construction and consolidation of neoliberal modes of governance and regulatory institutions.

In a similar conjuncture, PT came to power after the turbulent years of the 1990s, which witnessed the successive attempts of the Collor, Franco and, more significantly, Cardoso governments to achieve a neoliberal transition of the Brazilian economy, which had lagged behind the democratic transition of the mid-1980s. Liberalisation of trade, finance and capital flows dismantled the industrial base in many of the country’s manufacturing centres and poor economic performance undermined domestic consumption, which, in turn, strangled investment and further exacerbated fiscal imbalances (see Amann and Baer 2000). Much like AKP, PT’s first election victory was based on building a ‘losers’ alliance’ unifying different sections of capital, the manufacturing sector above all, under the premises of sustainable economic growth, and providing a wider base of support among the subordinate classes, which had been penalised by job cuts, a decline in real wages and the contraction of public services that accompanied Brazil’s neoliberal transition (Morais and Saad-Filho 2005). PT’s reconstruction of the system of power was geared toward satisfying the needs of financial capital and export-oriented sectors, while remaining loyal to the IMF-agreed programme to reach, or even exceed, the fiscal plus target (Kliass 2011).

The most striking feature of both the AKP and PT governments, for the purpose of this paper, is their shared ability to establish close and unmediated relationships – through the persona of their leaders, Erdoğan and Lula – with the poor sections of the labouring classes, and to contain, redirect
and even co-opt trades unions and other social movements through various techniques of government that epitomise neoliberal populism. Indeed, the presidential-style charisma of these leaders would be useless if the forces of neoliberalism had not successfully disarticulated social class and the representational forms historically associated with class. The new working class in Turkey and Brazil is both structurally disorganised and distrustful of existing structures of representation, which have become increasingly ineffective. Thus, to understand the ability of these two neoliberal populist governments to contain the subordinated classes in their neoliberal project, we need to consider deep-seated changes that these parties made in political allegiances.

Depoliticising the Question of Poverty

While showing their commitment to rolling back neoliberal policies in public finance, industrial relations and the labour market, both AKP and PT implemented active state policies addressing the most basic needs of the working poor. A remarkable feature of the social policy environment in Turkey over the last decade has been the creation and effective use of a complex web of social assistance, involving public poverty reduction programmes, local municipalities, faith-based charitable organisations and other private initiatives (see Özden 2014). Welfare governance under AKP, in other words, has brought public, semi-public and private efforts together to alleviate the worst excesses of poverty in a new way that disarticulates social relations and conflicts within civil society (cf. Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004, 575). AKP-controlled local governments and Islamic-oriented charitable organisations channel millions of dollars in donations, thereby representing the state’s subcontracting of some of its social responsibilities along with the reinforcement of local governance through decentralisation. Although such social assistance programmes have been inconsistent, unreliable and poorly coordinated, their populist reach and scope has enabled them to appeal directly to the poor and earn the consent of a wide cross-section of public opinion for neoliberal economic policies, including the privatisation of some social services and health care (Eder 2014).

The numerous private initiatives to alleviate poverty have been coupled with a growing number of public social assistance schemes, organised by a total of 973 Social Cooperation Foundations located at the city or provincial level. Among the most popular programmes run by these foundations are the provision of educational materials for children, food and coal allowances, widow benefits and housing support. However, since 2003, the flagship programme of these foundations has been the Conditional Cash...
Transfers (CCTs) scheme, which was initially started within the framework of the World Bank’s Social Risk Mitigation Project. The programme includes the provision of monetary subsidies to targeted households living in extreme poverty, provided that they ensure their children attend school and participate in periodic health-related activities. By 2011, it was reaching approximately 10 million people per year. Though these distributed stipends are low by any standards, its political impact has been huge, not only because it has helped, to a certain degree, to reduce poverty and stimulate demand in the most afflicted regions of the country (see Köse and Bahçe 2009; Akan 2011), but because it has also delivered the symbolic message that the government and the state actually care for the poor. Consequently, there is growing evidence that these poverty alleviation programmes have entrenched the image of Erdoğan as the fatherly guardian of the poor.2

A similar development can be seen in Brazil, where Lula took over the cash transfer programme established by the Cardoso government, but extended it broadly in order to modify the country’s social geography. Especially, after the infamous mensalão corruption scandal in 2005, after which large segments of the middle classes turned their backs on PT, Lula manoeuvred to cultivate support from the poorest sectors of the population by extending the scope of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) programme. This contributed to a huge shift in electoral support in the 2006 elections, giving Lula and PT new voters who had eluded them before (Hall 2006; Hunter and Power 2007). By 2012, the Bolsa Família had become the world’s largest CCT programme, reaching almost 13.5 million families and 45 million people (about one quarter of Brazil’s population) (Lavinias 2013, 17).

Cash transfer programmes have been criticised by the left for undermining a universal rights-based approach by abandoning the concept of ‘entitlements.’ Instead, critics see them as promoting neoliberal values of efficiency and individualisation, in the sense of constructing the subjectivity of the poor as market subjects who are ‘responsibilised’ to rationally make investments in the education and health of their children in order to increase their ‘human capital’ (Luccisano 2004; Ferguson 2007). It must be acknowledged, however, that even though the programme was paradigmatically neoliberal, it has helped to reduce poverty. According to Brazilian government figures, 20 million people were lifted out of poverty while extreme poverty decreased from 12 per cent to 4.8 per cent between 2003 and 2008 (Ansell 2011, 23).

As Francisco de Oliveira (2006, 22) suggests, by turning poverty and inequality into administrative problems, such novel poverty alleviation programmes are very effective in decentring social problems from the political debate and cleavages. This is in parallel with Andre Singer’s analysis that the accomplishment of the social policies of neopopulist governments is that they render the poor ‘without resentment of the rich, satisfied with modest and gradual alleviations of [their] conditions of existence’ (Anderson 2011, 26). That is, AKP’s and PT’s approach to social policy represents a strategy of what James Ferguson (1994) astutely describes as ‘anti-politics’: it marginalises and obscures the spheres of political contestation.

Deradicalising Labour

The current success of this neoliberal populist strategy was not guaranteed, however, by the poverty reduction programmes alone. Rather, the fundamental factor that made it possible, and even successful, was the decades-long weakening and near-disappearance of many organised actors in society (especially the labour movement), due to both structural and political-ideological reasons.

Structurally, we may cite the neoliberal labour market reforms that have altered the class composition of these societies over the last three decades. The most visible effect of Turkey’s orientation to neoliberalism in the last three decades has been the impact of adjustment on employment and labour market structures. Suppression of wage incomes in the 1980s and labour shedding policies in the early 1990s were the main strategies deployed to absorb the shocks of economic crises. These were accompanied by the intensification of marginalised labour through various tactics, such as outsourcing, job flexibility and deregulation of labour relations. By the mid-1990s, roughly half of Turkey’s labour force in private manufacturing was informally employed, indicating the formation of a dual labour market with widening gaps between the earnings of workers in different labour categories (Boratav et al. 2000). Already a grave problem, unemployment reached record highs in the early 2000s, while the proportion of workers without social security reached a peak of 53 per cent in 2004. In the face of these challenges, the government’s major policy approach was promoting labour market reforms to expand flexible work forms, like temporary work, through private employment bureaus, tele-working, on-call work,

home-working and job sharing, and suggesting the replacement of job security with ‘flexicurity’ in Turkey’s employment regime.

In Brazil, the same processes have significantly increased the heterogeneity of the working class. Throughout the 1990s, the deindustrialisation of the country prompted the disappearance of salaried posts while unemployment more than tripled. Meanwhile, four out of five jobs created during the 1990s were in the ‘informal sector’ (de Oliveira 2006, 11). This restructuring of the production process eroded the base of the labour movement, as well as the political influence of unions over society. This structural change also gave rise to a new form of subjectivity, corroding the prospect of class solidarity and collective self-identification and inculcating instead values of individual competition (Saad-Filho 2013). This is all the more true for Turkey, where the bulk of the working class is comprised of young, low-paid and poorly trained subcontracted workers who have little chance to access stable jobs in the formal sector. This class is more atomised than ever and is relatively inexperienced in collective action. Decades of neoliberal restructuring have undermined their power to organise through trades unions or left-wing parties and have reduced the transformative capacity of the labour movement. While trades unions organised 35 per cent of the labour force in 1980, today the figure is barely 6 per cent (Özuğurlu 2009, 347).

Along with this social transformation of the labour force, the demobilisation of labour in both Turkey and Brazil was also caused by changes in institutional interactions between trades unions and the state and the political and ideological environment in which the labour movement found itself.

The institutional framework of industrial relations, in which the trades unions operate under the conditions created by neoliberal restructuring, and the form of mentality and culture which is nourished by it, have undermined the unions’ capacity to understand, strategise and mobilise. From their early years in the late 1940s, trades unions in Turkey were regarded as exclusively workers’ institutions, hence involved only in affairs relating to their members, using primarily their lobbying power in Ankara as the main strategy for promoting their members’ interests (Doğan 2014). The labour unions’ longstanding concern for their own members and neglect of other underprivileged wage earners, have made their cause less popular, especially in the last two decades when the aforementioned transformations have increasingly fragmented the working class. The same tendency to concentrate entirely and narrowly on defending their membership can also be observed in the Brazilian trades union movement. In the 1980s, organised labour successfully established a ‘welfare-state platform’ to fight against the military regime and demand social citizenship for all workers, while
today they seem to have closed off the movement in ‘micro-corporativism,’ defending only workers connected with their base and ignoring the plight of other workers, such as the poor or the new ‘precariat’ (Boito 2007).

Similarities between the historical development of Turkey’s and Brazil’s welfare regimes also underpinned such sectionalism by the trades unions. Turkey’s social security system epitomised the corporatist and elitist nature of the social security systems that developed in the aftermath of World War Two. Health and old age insurance schemes were established mainly as a privilege for workers in the formal sector, civil servants and Turkey’s assorted middle class (Buğra 2007). However, a considerable portion of the labour force employed in the informal sector and agriculture was excluded from the system and, even for the small stratum of the labour market included in it, the social benefits provided varied considerably according to occupationally-defined status differentials. In a parallel trajectory, Brazilian social policy institutions have always marginalised large sectors of the working population. While some basic rights were entitled to extend the scope of social citizenship during the ‘classical populist period,’ rural workers, who made up the majority of the population, were not included in the package of social rights. Pension schemes and health care benefits differed according to one’s employment status, depending on whether one was a civil servant or a wage earner, in the public or the private sector, an industrial or a commercial worker, and so on. The social security system excluded both the unemployed and those employed in the informal economy.

Neoliberal populist governments have been very proficient at politically manipulating these segmentations and inequalities between different sectors of workers. For example, AKP has presented its labour market reforms as targeting alleged labour ‘rigidities’ and the ‘privileges’ of the formal, organised segments of the labouring classes. A recurrent theme emphasised by Prime Minister Erdoğan and his policymakers has been that labour reforms work in favour of the disadvantaged segments of the population, especially unemployed youth and women, as the new programmes and policies ease labour market rigidities and increase the private employers’ demand for labour. In effect, the government has successfully used the hierarchical and inegalitarian nature of the established social welfare regime in Turkey as a pretext to pit one sector, whose alleged privileges it is abolishing, against the other, which it continues to support through clientelism and social assistance programmes. In Brazil, PT followed two different tactics to paralyse the social movements. First, given his working-class background, Lula was more inclined to use the strategy of appealing to the disorganised by targeting the privileges of formal sector workers. He
also tried to split and marginalise the land reform movement by extending rural credits and technical assistance programmes to settled peasants and subsistence farmers while ignoring demands for a comprehensive land reform that would ensure a decent quantity of arable land for all farmers. Brazil’s prominent landless rural workers movement, MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra), has been increasingly experiencing difficulties in maintaining its power since many poor peasants are reluctant to join the movement for fear of losing their benefits (Welch 2011; Reyes 2012). Second, thanks to the clientelist state, which enables the president to appoint thousands of civil servants at all levels of administration, Lula and Rousseff brought hundreds of trades union and social movement cadres into the state, leading to what was described as the ‘capture’ of Brazil’s social movements (see de Oliveira 2006; Saad-Filho and Morais 2014).

These developments largely explain why organised social actors in both countries were unable to play an effective role in recent uprisings. Although trades unions in Brazil and social movements such as MST attempted to take the initiative, their impact remained limited. Similarly, the unions in Turkey were just one of a number of ordinary actors within the uprising. That is, in both countries, dominated by socio-political crises, the organised social and/or political actors either remained secondary or failed to take the initiative. This leads us to two simple questions: If they were not organised actors, who were the rebels? What is their social profile as they remained outside the borders of the organised opposition? The answers are of crucial importance in understanding the capacities and limits of neoliberal populism.

Preliminary Reflections on the Protests

It is easier to understand the issue in the case of Brazil. The table below, which presents the shifts in the distribution of wages in Brazil within the last forty years, may provide some clue:

Table 5.1:  Brazil: Distribution of Wages (Percentage) (Saad-Filho and Morais 2014, 233)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 5 minimum wages</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 minimum wages</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5-3 minimum wages</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1.5 minimum wages</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwaged</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in the table, there have been two important shifts regarding employment during the Lula government. First, the growth in employment has been mainly provided through the increase of jobs with minimum or slightly higher wages. A significant part of poor *favelas* dwellers during the previous term has gained formal employment, which has brought about a relative decrease in poverty. Though they still live in the *favelas*, this sector, commonly named ‘Class C’ in mainstream statistical categorisations, has already stepped into the world of consumption. Though the term ‘middle class’ is also used to identify this section, they are mostly wage labourers who have shifted from informal networks of poverty to formal employment. Second, the table shows that the number of jobs providing a wage of three or more times the minimum wage has declined remarkably. This means that a significant number of ‘middle class’ families have experienced social degradation during Lula’s term in office.

This picture is quite compatible with what has been written about social mobilisation in the Brazilian uprising. First, masses of ‘Class C’ poured into the streets to demand more investment in public services like transportation, education and health, in order to increase the quality of employment and life. Then the ‘declining middle classes,’ who, in fact, after the 2006 elections gradually drifted away from PT, took to the streets in a series of anti-PT protests, with corruption being ranked higher than social demands. That is, the revolt in Brazil reflected two reactions: the new social needs of the ones climbing upwards and the reactions of those declining (see Saad-Filho 2013; Saad-Filho and Morais 2014).

In Turkey, the picture is not as clear. Those who participated in the uprising were mostly categorised by the mainstream media as ‘middle class,’ and certainly various observations and surveys hastily conducted during the events made it easy to adopt such a description. However, we still do not have much data about which sections of society joined the uprising. Instead of substantial data, observations, speculations and political appraisals prevail, and this paper is subject to similar limitations as well. Still, one study conducted after the Gezi Park uprising,⁴ which sampled around 4000 people, gives a rough profile of the participants:

35.5% of *Gezi* protestors work in irregular activities such as industrial production and textiles, waste paper collection, restaurants, and transportation, and 60% of them have a monthly income below 1,600 YTL (~800 USD). 31.2% of the protesters work in fields such as advertising,

---

finance, academia, insurance, education, public service sector, culture, literature, health, civil society organisations, or real estate. The average monthly income of this second section is 2,421 YTL (~1,200 USD), although 50% of them have salaries below 2,000 YTL (~1,000 USD).5

This profile is roughly similar to Brazil’s in that one group with an income that is 1.5 to 2 times the minimum wage is accompanied by professionals whose social status has declined since 2000. However, one should bear in mind that the political character of the Gezi uprising was overwhelmingly dominant, in the sense that cultural-cum-political concerns, rather than the social and economic ones, brought different sectors of society together (see Akça et al. 2014).

For example, in contrast to the Brazilian case, the Gezi protesters have never put forward any economic or social demands. Given that the real wages of the Turkish Class C have remained almost static during the last decade, this becomes even more interesting. Although it is true that the high level of political polarisation in Turkey may have substituted all social demands, one should also bear in mind that, unlike PT, AKP has been a successful tactical player of public service policies by pursuing a dual strategy concerning services such as health and education. On the one hand, the government has implemented a determined marketisation policy; on the other, it has increased public expenditure extensively. Through this dual policy, AKP has gained consent from different popular sectors of Turkish society. The health reforms, for instance, had obvious appeal for the poorest segments of the population (namely, the unemployed and marginal sector workers), which helped AKP win wider credibility. According to the Turkey Life Satisfaction Survey, satisfaction with health services increased from 39.5 per cent to 73.1 per cent between 2003 and 2010,6 while various surveys conducted over the last ten years indicate that AKP’s health policies receive the greatest popular support. On the other hand, the number of private medical institutions has increased continuously so that, alongside top-quality hospitals, other private medical services affordable by significant segments of wage-earners have mushroomed as well. Thus, as the heir to the Turkish New Right, AKP has been a successful popular capitalist actor. And, surprisingly, compared to leftist PT, this is what has made it more successful in terms of meeting popular expectations.

On the other hand, the mobilising motives of higher wage earners were primarily political. Economic and social concerns experienced through the specific cultural-cum-political polarisation have escalated throughout the AKP era. This is especially relevant for civil servants, whose participation in the uprising was considerable. Thanks to AKP’s strategy of placing its own Islamic-conservative cadres in executive positions within public offices since coming to power in 2002, civil servants working in public schools, hospitals and other state offices have experienced a real threat concerning their jobs and status in their workplaces. Thus, the Gezi uprising raised critical questions for people who, day after day, have to deal and struggle with these ‘mini Erdoğan.’ Consequently, their feeling was one of ‘If we lose, they will eliminate us.’ Moreover, this threat/risk perception is not just limited to the public sector. For example, there is evidence that the rapidly increasing market share of Islamist-conservative enterprises among private hospitals and education institutions has reached such a level that secularly-inclined workers in these sectors feel a sense of professional risk.

This risk perception should also be placed within a wider context that extends far beyond the current political situation in Turkey. It is not a coincidence that in the current wave of uprisings a significant portion of those taking to the streets were young civil servants and professionals, or students trying to make a step into that world. The ‘open-minded’ liberal analysts appearing in Turkey’s mainstream media labelled this highly visible section of the protestors as ‘the new middle class’ and/or ‘Generation Y,’ highlighting its individualist philosophy and life-style habits that supposedly make such individuals opposed to all kinds of authoritarianism. However, such interpretations have their roots in a simplistic understanding of modern society, implying that there is a strict relationship between the rise and prosperity of the so-called middle classes and liberal democracy. In fact, they miss the point that these young sectors of society represent not the rising and prospering, but the declining middle classes, who have experienced a kind of proletarianisation due to the structural transformation of neoliberal capitalism. The earlier phase of neoliberalism managed to offer open-ended careers and opportunities for white-collar professionals, at least for a considerable part of them. Today, on the contrary, they are increasingly exposed to jobs with declining wages and limited and predetermined career paths. These highly routinised jobs cause the loss of even relative control within the work process, with the oxymoronic category of ‘unskilled professionals’ becoming a prominent sector within the ranks of the white-collar middle classes. Only a narrow professional elite are currently able to continue their creative and promising career plans.
This means that today’s newly graduated professional-candidates have much fewer expectations than their counterparts did in the 1980s and 1990s. That is, young people and their concerns are once again becoming prominent within the new conditions of neoliberalism. It was these young people, whose lives oscillate between being a student and being unemployed and/or a flexible/freelance worker, lacking much hope in the future, who first hit the streets in the wake of the crisis of global capitalism. As precariousness passes from being a status denoting a specific mode of employment to an intense description of the social modes of life of the masses, social unease also increases. As happened in the Gezi uprisings, this situation can blur the classical distinction between political and economic demands, increasing the permeability between them.

In fact, with regard to these sectors, the current uprisings signify a process of class-consciousness formation. During the Gezi revolt, professional wage earners did not abandon their normal working hours, and those that were able to participate in daytime clashes continuously looked at their watches, waiting for the after-work participants to arrive. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, after their harsh, stultifying and unsatisfying daytime work experiences, these professionals experienced the street protests and other ‘subversive’ practices as moments of emancipation. On the other hand, their avoidance of radicalisation in their workplaces, such as missing working time and articulating into street radicalism after work (‘Clark Kent in the morning, Superman in the evening’ as they say), revealed, so to speak, the current phase of their class formation process.

In sum, it seems that for neoliberal populist regimes, both in Turkey and Brazil, it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy the needs of young and dynamic sectors within the middle classes. Moreover, as the Brazilian case reveals, new demands coming from the ranks of the labouring classes may push the limits of neoliberal poverty management to create a new wave of claims for expanding social citizenship rights. One can assume that the organic crisis of these regimes will come when the demands of these two different sectors come closer to one another and converge politically in order to create an alternative hegemonic bloc.

Bibliography


