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Turkey: forget Erdoğan for one minute, this is primitive capitalism

Nilüfer Göle interviewed by Cansu Çamlibel

A sociologist and an internationally known professor known for her studies on the relations between Islam, the public sphere and modernity, Nilüfer Göle visited Turkey shortly after the tragic events happened in Soma[1]. Professor and Directrice d'études at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, she coordinated a panel on the subject of “the resources and limitations of pluralism in today’s Turkey,” as part of the Istanbul Seminars that Reset-DoC organises every year in May at Bilgi University in Istanbul.

The original interview in Turkish is available on Hurriyet Daily News

Nilüfer Göle believes that today’s Turkey is not setting a good example as far as pluralism is concerned. She believes that in recent years, on issues such as this, the Turkish government has distanced itself from the earlier “Islamic-reformist” position, sliding dangerously towards a form of new authoritarian capitalism. According to Göle the tragedy in Soma was a simultaneous convergence of the various phases and aspects of capitalism. She criticises the attitude of those who set Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the centre of every analysis. Göle believes that this is the evidence of a ‘feminised’ Turkey, wishing to blame her husband for being the origin and cause of all problems. “Come, and let us forget about the prime minister,” said Nilüfer Göle, "Let us analyse the situation in a new way.”

What is your analysis of the events happened in Soma?

The whole world witnessed the tragedy in Soma. But the real pain and suffering was experienced by the workers, their families and those who live in Soma. In Turkey we saw the simultaneous convergence of the various historical phases and aspects of capitalism. A combination of the globalised modern capitalism and the pre-industrial model. A mix of "pre" and "post" capitalism.

Soma changed the fairy tale of Turkey’s development, the perception people have of capitalism, of life and of people’s working conditions. The tragic deaths of these miners appeared as the result of Turkey’s privatisation and uncontrolled capitalism. The combination of this kind of capitalism and global economic conditions demands a race for increasingly large profits and increased production that pays no attention to individuals or work-place security.
The conditions these miners experienced reminded us the meaning of the impossibility of a unionisation process. What does the Soma incident really tell us about Turkey’s working class?

Not even May 1st managed to become an opportunity for a real debate on workers’ rights and social issues. What dominated events was repression. Workers were not allowed to debate issues concerning union rights and the rights in the workplace. In terms of development, Turkey appears to have joined the orbit of new capitalist and authoritarian emerging countries. But Turkey is not a new China or a new Malaysia. It is part of the European continent. In this country not even the trade unions manage to fully protect workers.

Who will add social rights to today’s political agenda? How will be able do to this? These matters can only be discussed to the extent that there are independent associations in society, such as trade unions, civil associations and the media. That is democracy’s real function. Without this, those in power and the workers, the government and the citizens, remain set one against the other. And in this case there are only two alternatives, an embrace or a clash. This situation brings to light a serious democratic deficit. We want neither an embrace nor a clash with those in power, we want to maintain the right distance and have appropriate relations.

Although the working class has generally maintained a “left-wing” position until the 2000s, this appears to have been emphasised since the first AKP government came to power. During the early years of AKP government it was even more evident. After such a dramatic event, such as the one in Soma, how high is tension between the government and the workers?

To be honest I don’t know, that is a question to be answered by researchers. What I am certain of is that the AKP’s development model has reached its limit. Events at Gezi Park had already provided a first sign. Speaking of mega-projects, of vertical development and global growth, we have forgotten the importance of human beings and the environment surrounding them. We have begun to ask ourselves not so much how much one should continue to grow, but in what manner this should be achieved. What has been revealed is the face of an aggressive capitalism which ignores the quality of life, safety in the work place, the health of citizens. Protecting the integrity of individuals is nowadays the common denominator of social movements. This applies to white collar workers in the cities and to those working in mines.

They preferred to interpret Gezi as an attempted coup d'état instead of a strong signal on these issues.
Yes, not only the government, but also a movement that was formed close to it, appear to have embarked in a new “perception operation.” The level of intolerance those in power have reached today is well portrayed in a photograph showing one of the prime minister’s advisers, wearing a coat and tie, beating up a local citizen[2]. After Gezi, many authors adopted that same attitude. Their kicks and punches are delivered through their editorials. All those who have criticised the government have been accused of being Alevi terrorists, counter-revolutionaries, repressive intellectuals, rebels and leaders of a coup.

Is there not perhaps just one man and those who work with him at the centre of all this? Don’t they all perhaps draw strength from the prime minister?

Let us forget Erdoğan for a moment. Let us try and reflect for a moment without bringing him into the picture. All our analyses are always centred on the prime minister, and the conclusions we come to are not always correct. This really is a “feminised”-Turkey syndrome, wishing to blame her husband for being the cause of all her problems.

Therefore in your opinion, placing the prime minister at the centre of every debate means we are looking for an easy escape?

Yes, in a sense it is a simplification. Even if the prime minister stood down today we would still be faced with these problems and we need to be aware of this. First of all let us try and analyse the situation in a broader manner. We are discussing a power that has been experiencing growth for a decade. In Turkey, Huntington’s thesis of a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West has remained in limbo. It is for this very reason that Turkey was pointed out by many as being the country condemned to resolve this conflict. Will Turkey confirm Huntington’s thesis or, on the contrary, be the country capable of inverting and overcoming this clash? That is the real reason for which Turkey was placed under a spotlight. With the Arab Spring there was a debate over Turkey's role as a model country, capable of combining political stability, affluence and cultural wealth.

However, exactly the opposite occurred. It was starting with the Arab Spring that matters turned sour in Turkey.

Yes, you are right. How is it possible that just the opposite happened? When I propose an analysis of our country without taking into account the prime minister, I am proposing that we
also address some of our defeats. Firstly, our struggle with Europe. We have all closed ranks behind this issue and having lived there for a long time, I am the first to be aware of the European reluctances.

However, Turkey also has missed a very important appointment with Europe. We did, of course, do our best. Then the ball came to our court. With the Arab Spring, Turkey, still rejected by Europe, became the “object of desire” for many. But Morsi’s defeat ruined the chemistry of our power.

Turkey’s third defeat is linked to the international community’s inability to resolve the Syrian issue. The idea of Turkey being the key to Middle Eastern equilibrium was correct. This was followed by the idea of a democratisation of the region, rejecting the legitimacy of power supported by the army. To achieve this it would have been necessary to avoid demonising the Islamic question. This was the particularity of the Arab Spring and of the AKP’s attitude. But it did not turn out that way. This is not only a Turkish defeat and it is not a situation one can explain by just analysing one player. And yet we have a leader who sees these defeats as the last throws of the dice in a plot against him. But history cannot be written in this way.

You were one of the first to address the problem of victimisation, “the poor Muslims” exploited by those in power. Should the AKP continue on the path of the Muslim Brotherhood, what might happen when the “poor Muslims” come to power?

Ten years ago I already observed that those coming to power were no longer “poor Muslims”. Nowadays we see the effects of the pathology that this victimisation has led to.

The power that states “I am the victim” is a power that misrepresents the rights of its citizens. At this point the suffering of others, the disdain of the republican classes, the alienation of the Alevis[3] and workers’ conditions are all ignored. It seems that they perceive all discordant opinions as an attempt to steal their power. Money, power and the desire for fame are all aspects that should be contained. One would expect more self-control from a religious and Islamic movement. Such an excess of ambition should offend real believers.

What ideology is forming while all this takes place? What kind of ideological framework is being formed while all this takes place?
With the ascent of the AKP, the Conservative Right started to change. The centre-right tradition started with the Democratic Party[4] is about to vanish. The exclusion of authors such as Nazli Ilicak[5], who in the Sixties represented the democratic, conservative and liberal political ideal, against the army, indicates a very important breaking point. The fact that it proved possible to harshly silence such a voice, proves that we have entered a new and dangerous era. After setting aside his political ‘father’ Erbakan[6], and destroying the tradition of right-wing liberalism, Erdoğan is creating a new centre all for himself. During the second period in power, the AKP seemed to slowly slip from “Islamic reformism” towards “authoritarian capitalism”. As the public sphere is concerned, the AKP seems a political formation capable of combining capitalism with “social engineering” procedures.

**Was the AKP ever concerned about belonging to a liberal Right? Did conservatism not always bring strong pressure on the party?**

Yes, of course, this is the most serious criticism we must address at intellectuals such as ourselves. Intellectuals opened the door to these people who had never been liberals. During the Eighties, Islamic intellectuals reflected upon and wrote about pluralism and the state’s limits. Nowadays, there is no respect for pluralism, but only for the majority.

**In your opinion, what is the most problematic aspect of the AKP’s way of addressing politics?**

We are continuously immersed in the politics of tension. When I was a young sociologist, I was very impressed by something Turgut Özal[7] said. "People in this country do not love one another. What if we taught them to be happier in a union with God?" Now I understand how true his words were. How can a society that cannot get close to the state, the nation, the government and religion find peace? Today, the AKP government has reached a very strong polarisation, moving towards hatred it does not forgive. It is an agenda that distances the AKP from the tradition of Özal and Menderes[8]. In my opinion, nowadays the AKP has broken off its link with Özal. It no longer has his inclusion capabilities. And yet, even then criticism was levelled at the government, Emin Çolasan[9] wrote a book entitled "Who is Turgut running from?" A very critical publication. Even students at Boğaziçi University appreciated that book at the time. This too is democracy; people may write books like that. But Özal never fomented clashes. He was always a leader ready to compromise and establish a dialogue. At the time I thought that no different political agenda could ever win in Turkey. I was wrong. One should try and understand what the roots of that reconciling attitude were. How far will we go? I think that an attitude that rejects dialogue does not bode well for Turkey. Perhaps it is just my desire, but it will be very hard to continue with this level of tension. Everyone feels they have been taken for a ride and their dignity is offended, not only the minorities and the republican classes. Remember the beating given by that adviser… We all felt as we had been kicked. We all feel insulted.
Why did the AKP abandon its conciliatory stand? It was still politically very powerful. It struggled to come to power and then assumed a rigid position on society’s rifts in order to remain in power? Is that correct?

One must understand that following the military coup, Turkey no longer belongs to any state. That is why the constitution, the independence of the judiciary, bureaucratic stability are all important. This same mistake was made by the republican élites who behaved as if the republic belonged to them. We instead, never felt we owned the country; we wanted to share this republic with everyone. Now there is one part of society claiming the country for itself. This is just a new expression of what I have called the “single player pathology.”

Let us open another parenthesis. Although the events of December 17th can be linked to the clash between the government and Fetullah Gülen's[10] cemaat, they did raise serious allegations concerning corruption within the government. Why did believers not consider these allegations important?

We believed that democracy was a regime of truth. But in countries in which Twitter is blocked there are no more truths. One has no news. During the coups d’état we used to try and listen to the BBC on small radios. The real lifelines of democracy are having information and access to the truth. Nowadays, with the incredible development of technologies, we very quickly have access to news, and there is also the fact that new secrets are continuously revealed. First there was Wikileaks, then wire-tapping, and similar things happened in France too. Nowadays democracies have entered a new era. Neither the state nor individuals have secrets any more. But, even with all this transparency we are unable to establish the truth. We can have all the tapes and the images, but that will not be enough to know the truth. In spite of all this information being available now, democratic regimes have stopped being regimes of truth. We no longer know what is true and what is not. Turkey must reassess its regime of truth. Faced with such serious allegations, the government should try and search for the truth and make it known.

Years ago you wrote a book called The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling. Now instead you are telling us that privacy no longer exists for anyone. Are we really ready to live in such a transparent manner?

In the past I already said that there is no simple relationship between modernity and intimacy, and that privacy should be respected in the modern era. Transparency is one of the most important concepts of our times, but it remains a limited one. Allow me to make an example. In Europe there is currently a widespread debate about the shape of mosques, about what the aesthetics of their architecture should be. People want mosques to be visible so that they are not
seen with suspicion from the exterior. Ideology is what once mattered; now it is form. Architects are attempting to make mosques attractive to Europeans. They try and give them a beautiful shape. The mosque in Cologne has managed to provide a new image of Islam in Europe, with its modern and yet traditional style, visible and transparent enough to reassure suspicious European eyes. Profound political-cultural rifts have been overcome through aesthetics. Those unable to create beauty cannot create civilisation. Doubts remain regarding the 'civilising' ideals behind the project for the mosque in Camlica[11]. But the government, which always speaks in terms of "we and the others", "we and the élites", will never create something positive. Is it possible to create something beautiful without creating an élite?

**Yet, they let power become elitist.**

With such a hostile elitist attitude it is difficult to create something better, something more beautiful and more truthful.

Modern development does not bring beauty. Modernity is like a television screen, flat, slippery and without a soul. It appears that modernity’s fundamental characteristic is precisely this, being transparent, smooth and polished. It seems that Turkey greatly appreciates this idea in this historical period… We are even restoring entire buildings so that no trace of their history remains.

**The government has labelled the current period as a phase of the "new Turkey".**

"New" does not necessarily mean "better." Actually this is the ironic part of the question. It is indeed a conservative movement that is cutting our roots with tradition. This movement has no longer any relationship with the past; it is always in search of what is new. That is why it is like other developing countries, and why it considers outdated its role in old continental Europe.

Many countries have experienced the appearance of vertical cities, strong leaders, unrestrained capitalism and consumerism, in different historical periods. Like China, Malaysia or India. In addition to this, the West is no longer the centre of our analyses. This too is a sign of development. The challenges presented by democracy nowadays no longer only concern the history of the West. Even new street protests have developed new visions and there is a new creative energy. Gezi Park managed to create a new way of understanding citizenship among those who prayed, those doing yoga, those preparing for the iftar[12]. Preparing street dinners in Beyoğlu[13] was a gesture as powerful as many words, and even more. It was a new form of political expression. Without looking for representatives, people gathered in the public square, exercising a new democracy rehearsal.
Notes (by Emanuela Pergolizzi)

[1] On May 23rd 2014 an explosion in a coal mine in the western city of Soma caused the death of 301 miners in the most serious workplace tragedy in the history of the Turkish Republic.

[2] A reference to news reported on Thursday May 14th 2014. The day after the mining tragedy, during the prime minister’s visit to Soma, a number of photographers portrayed a protester being beaten up by one of the prime minister’s advisors.

[3] The Alevis are the largest religious minority in Turkey, with between 10 and 15 million believers, about 25 percent of the population. Over the past ten years, the Turkish government has showed initial important signs of openness, such as including notes on the Alawite beliefs in text books for courses on “religious and ethical culture” in schools. The cemaevi, Alevi places of worship, however, are not yet legally recognised by the Turkish state, and the minority is not represented in the Turkish Ministry for Religious Affairs, the Diyanet. Relations between the AKP government and the Alawite minority reached their highest level of tension in May 2013 following Prime Minister Erdoğan’s decision to dedicate the third bridge over the Bosphorus, currently under construction, to Sultan Selim I, also known as “The Cruel One”, responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Alevis in 1514.

[4] The Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) was a centre-right party founded in 1945 by Adnan Menderes. When the Kemalist single-party system dominated by the People's Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the Demokrat Parti became the only real political alternative in the history of the Turkish Republic and the first opposition party to come to power in 1950.

[5] Nazli Ilicak, a journalist and former Member of Parliament, worked for many years for the daily Sabah, known for its pro-government stand. In December 2013, during the corruption scandals involving key members of the government, Ilicak openly criticised the manner in which the AKP had investigated this case from the pages of Sabah. On December 18th 2013, Ilicak lost his job and now writes for the daily paper Bügün.
Necmettin Erbakan was a Turkish politician, prime minister between 1995 and 1996 and the leader of the Islamic movement with a "national vision" (Milli Görüş), and in the Nineties the current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was also a member. Erbakan’s government ended with the so-called “post-modern coup d’état” or “white coup” on February 28th 1997, the last time the army directly intervened in Turkey’s political life. Erbakan was obliged to resign, and his party, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP), was closed by the Turkish Constitutional Court for violating the principle of a separation between religion and the state. The end of Erbakan political careers and of the RP sparked a vast process of reflection with the National Vision Movement and the separation of a reformist current that was at the origin of the current “Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Turgut Özal was twice Prime Minister of Turkey between 1983 and 1989 and President of the Turkish Republic between 1989 and 1993. Secretary and founder of the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP), Özal is considered one of the historical centre-right leaders in Turkey in continuity with Adnan Menderes (prime minister between 1950 and 1960).

Adnan Menderes was the founder of the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti) in 1945 in opposition to the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) of Kemalist inspiration. He was the first leader of a centre-right party to become prime minister after the end of the single-party system in Turkey. Menderes’ government was abruptly deposed by the 1960 military coup d’état, after which he was tried and sentenced to death.

Emin Çolasan is a Turkish journalist who worked for 22 years, from 1985 to 2007, for the Turkish daily newspaper Hurriyet. His strong criticism of the government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are considered the reason for which he was dismissed on August 13th 2007. During the Eighties instead, Colasan distinguished himself with his violent criticism of Prime Minister Özal, the leading character in his first bestsellers ("The Adventures of Turgut" and "Who is Turgut running from?").

Cemaat is the term used to refer to the Islamic movement established by Fetullah Gülen, a charismatic preacher who lives in the United States and who is the leader of an international network of Islamic schools and cultural centres. Following the anonymous release on December 17th 2013 of taped conversations that resulted in key members of the government being accused of corruption, Fetullah Gülen was accused by the AKP and by Prime Minister Erdoğan, of being the secret author of a defamation campaign against the government.

Nilüfer Göle refers to a government project - inaugurated in August 2013 – to build a gigantic mosque, 288 metres tall, on Çamlica, the city’s highest hill, an historically a green area for
people to walk in and observe birds migrating on the Bosphorus. Measuring 15,000 square metres, and designed to host 30,000 believers, the mosque has been designed to be seen from every part of the city.

[12]Iftar is the evening meal that interrupts the fast during the month of Ramadan.

[13]Beyoğlu is Istanbul’s secular heart and the district that hosts Taksim Square, where the Gezi Park clashes took place in May and June 2013. At an unprecedented event, in July 2013 the various factions that took part in the Gezi Park protests, met to prepare collective meals in the streets for iftar, along Istiklal Street.

http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000022412