



The making of neoliberal Turkey

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BOOK REVIEW

The Making of Neoliberal Turkey, edited by Cenk Özbay, Maral Erol, Ayşecan Terzioğlu and Z. Umut Türem, Farnham/Rochester, Ashgate, 2016, 241 pp., £75.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4724-7383-7

Despite the recurring criticisms of its analytical power and the perceived fuzziness of its parameters, neoliberalism remains a key concept in the toolkit of critical social sciences and the vast literature dealing with its manifold processes and effects continues to refine its usage with an ever-growing emphasis on unearthing the *modi operandi* of 'actually existing neoliberalisms' (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Springer 2015; Stenning et al. 2010). *The Making of Neoliberal Turkey* is the latest entry to the field with an avowed aim to chart the 'new landscape of power' in Turkey (2) and it joins a host of critical contributions that analyse the evolution of neoliberalism in Turkey under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹

The volume stands out from the other important contributions to the literature on Turkey with its explicit focus on revealing the functioning of neoliberalism 'not only at the macro level but also at the very micro, capillary sites' of everyday politics (4). This orientation is reinforced by a theoretical infrastructure built around the concepts of governmentality and governmentalisation, which are prioritised as the optics with which to explain how '[I]f itself has been reconfigured by legal, political, cultural, and symbolic interventions' (6) as part of Turkey's path to neoliberalisation. The corollary of this focus on governmentality is the rejection of arguably more mainstream approaches to Turkish political economy, which, as the editors highlight, tend to assert the primacy of the state and project 'relatively rigid conceptualizations of hegemony with a strong emphasis on the economic dynamics' (4). Yet the editors quickly acknowledge that 'ignoring the state in the Turkish landscape of power' would be a fatal mistake, particularly since the AKP governments have affected 'a *de jure* unification of the ruling party and the state apparatuses' (6–7).

It is difficult to do justice to the breadth of original research contained in the volume's thematically diverse chapters in a short review, but it is important to highlight the several connecting threads that bind the analyses together. In line with the editors' emphasis on governmentality, the governing and (self-)disciplining of subjects is a central focus in several chapters. The impact of neoliberal transformation on women, migrants, minorities and football fans are carefully unpacked by contributors, often through insightful ethnographic studies. Local developments that correspond to the broader trends observed in the global processes of neoliberalisation, such as the biomedicalisation and individualisation of health care, are attentively contextualised and present important contributions to the aforementioned literature on 'actually existing neoliberalisms'.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on capillary sources of power and the conduct of subjects, the spectre of the Turkish state looms large in the volume. The important role played by the state apparatuses in designing, reinforcing and reproducing the pillars of neoliberal governmentality is a recurring theme throughout the chapters and it is in these passages a certain tension between the editors' focus on governmentality and the relatively under-theorised role of the state becomes apparent. For example, while some authors subscribe to a conception of neoliberalism as a process that engenders a 'retreat of the state from the economic sphere' and embodies a prioritisation of

the 'free market' (Şenses, 15, Unalan, 222), the others underscore the state's constitutive role in facilitating neoliberal policies and in enshrining the 'competitiveness' of the market (e.g. Türem, 41–42). To demonstrate the latter point, Ebru Kayaalp, in one of the most compelling chapters in the book, argues that an emergent neoliberal consensus on preserving market stability at all costs forced the then state-owned tobacco monopoly TEKEL to destroy its 'oversupply' tobacco stock during the 1990s and 2000s. Kayaalp dispels the state-phobic/free market-oriented narrative of neoliberalism in one masterful stroke by emphasising that 'in order to make the invisible hand maintain the balance in the market, a very visible hand, the state [had] to intervene and burn the crop that it has bought' (184).

The well-justified critique of neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality is also coupled with reflections that firmly place the state at the centre of a non-neoliberal countermovement. This 'retreat' back to the state is manifested in chapters where progressive solutions to the country's macroeconomic woes are sought in growth-oriented, state-led proposals (Şenses, 29),² or the state's role in 'governing [international] migration' is implicitly reenshrined by speculating on the capacity of new institutions to improve the 'mediocre' success of Turkish migration policy (Sert and Yıldız, 69). Thus, the editors' warranted rejection of *statolatry* is coupled with an unresolved tension revolving around the theorisation of the state, which ultimately brings forth the question of what kind of concrete strategies for radical and emancipatory politics can be drawn from the book, and what role the state would play in such radical alternatives to the existing neoliberal governmentality?

One avenue in which the above questions could have been elaborated more forcefully would be to construct an extended engagement with the various Marxist approaches to neoliberalism, yet the book eschews establishing a serious dialogue with one of the key critical resources on neoliberalism. On the contrary, the volume's own conceptual framework seems to be placed in diametrical opposition to Marxist approaches, as one editor claims that the 'bottom up method' espoused by the contributors 'has the potential to account for the "actual process by which [neoliberalism] became hegemonic, to the point of becoming common sense", (Read 2009, 25) something which Marxist political economy and its purportedly top down method fails to do' (Türem, 34). This is an unfortunate portrayal, given the crucial work on 'common sense' developed by Marxist and Marxian approaches,³ but it should also be seen as a symptom of a wider disengagement with the state of the art Marxist literature in Turkish Studies (cf. Tansel 2015, 574, 575).

In conclusion, *The Making of Neoliberal Turkey* is a significant contribution to an already crowded field. The book's insistence on reframing the processes of neoliberalisation through the prism of governmentality, the impressive empirical scope of its contributions and the rich interdisciplinary research it brings together, makes the volume an essential read for critical social scientists and the scholars of Turkish political economy.

Notes

1. See, *inter alia*, Coşar and Yücesan-Özdemir (2012); Akça, Bekmen, and Özden (2014); Tuğal (2016).
2. This proposal also brings up the question of whether explicitly growth-oriented policies could be aligned with the environmental concerns outlined in Unalan's chapter.
3. See Bruff (2008); Tyler (2013); Konings (2015).

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