

EREN DUZGUN

*Debating Capitalism in Turkey*  
*Rejoinder to Roy Karadag*

I APPRECIATE THIS OPPORTUNITY to address the critical comments made by Roy Karadag on my article “Class, State and Property: Modernity and Capitalism in Turkey” (Duzgun 2012). In the article, I argued that both Weberian and Marxian approaches to modernity in Turkey tend to ascribe a pre-given capitalist rationality to bourgeois classes. By uncritically equating bourgeoisie to capitalism, they not only obscure the socio-temporal processes whereby the Turkish bourgeoisie formulated its interests, but also render totally incomprehensible the historically distinct origins and mutual transformation of modernity and capitalism in Turkey. I suggested that capitalist rationality cannot be assigned to bourgeois classes on a *a priori* basis, but arises only in a society already composed of capitalist social relations. This is a society wherein the politico-cultural relations and the nature of social power are organized in hitherto unparalleled ways, such that the market eventually becomes conceivable as a “separate” sphere that renders capitalist rationality an “imperative” for the social reproduction of all social classes, the surplus appropriator and the direct producer alike (*cf.* Wood 1995). In this light, one of the arguments the article made was that Turkey’s current transformation cannot be understood as a product of the eventual “maturation/rationalization” of bourgeois agency as many scholars assumed, but ‘underlined by the historically unprecedented consolidation of capitalist property relations and the associated emergence of novel forms of rule and subjectivity in Turkey’ (Duzgun 2012, p. 123).

Roy Karadag presents a critique of this last point, which boils down to two essential arguments: first, that I apparently neglect social agency; and second, that I allegedly depict the recent transformation of Turkish political economy as a “depoliticized” process. Combined

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*European Journal of Sociology*, LIV, 1 (2013), pp. 153–156—0003-9756/13/0000-0007\$07.50 per art + \$0.10 per page  
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together, Karadag thinks that I overlook that the Turkish economy is dominated by a “new” and “stable” set of corruption networks, with a new cohort of businessmen that rule the economy through their “personal linkages” to the governing party. The “economic” is still immersed in the political processes at various levels, thus no “true” “separation” of the political and the economic ever occurred in Turkey, which supposedly contrasts the conclusions arrived in my article. I thank Karadag for his scholarly engagement. And yet his critique is based on a severe misreading of and only partially relevant to the points put forward in my article. In the limited space allowed, I will first focus on the question of the so-called “separation” of the political and the economic under capitalism, then move on to the issue of social agency.

I have no clue as to what a “truly” independent market may look like. But Karadag’s insistence on a “true” separation certainly hints at a reified understanding of market as a neutral, ahistorical and apolitical institution. With markets abstracted from their socio-historical roots, Karadag pulls out a checklist he borrowed from an idealized world of markets, according to which he declares the “separation” in Turkey is not “truly” complete. As such, Karadag pigeonholes Turkish capitalism based on some transhistorically-defined path to market-making. This, in turn, produces a sociology of “absences” that constantly searches for the ‘missing elements’ from a theoretically presupposed path to socio-economic development.

One implication is that Karadag disregards the distinctiveness of the spatio-temporal dimension of late modernization. That is, late transition to modernity and capitalism faced an international environment significantly different from that of the earlier modernizers, which renders totally irrelevant any static criterion of comparing spatio-temporally distinct processes of market-making. Consequently, Karadag’s depiction of continuing corruption and new patterns of state-business relations as deviations from a “true” capitalism obscures, more than it illuminates, the politico-cultural processes of market-building in the contemporary world. Indeed, if we really employ the corruption criterion as an indicator of the degree of “deviation” from Karadag’s “true capitalism”, Italy is much worse than and South Korea is almost as equally bad as Turkey, according to the 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>1</sup> Then perhaps the issue of corruption must be formulated differently. Rather than comparing markets according to some abstract corruption criterion, we have to ask what keeps corruption from overwhelming some

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2012/results>

markets, whereas it renders utterly dysfunctional some others (*cf.* Evans 1989). More specifically, once we begin to question what has prevented the state-business relations in Turkey in the 2000s from taking a devastatingly corrupted form as they did in the 1990s, I believe we have to go back to the “great transformation” Turkish society has gone through since 2001, a process my article elaborates and Karadag totally underestimates.

The critique that there is no social class in my account is rather odd, as the objective of my article was “to re-assert the centrality of class by re-emphasizing its historicity” (Duzgun 2012, p. 122). If Karadag’s point is that I did not provide a detailed analysis of struggles between different business associations and so on, that’s correct. Yet, that has already been amply documented by many scholars and was hardly the point of my article. The more crucial task was to develop a socially and temporally cognizant account of the “rise of bourgeoisie” in Turkey, which is precisely what I sought to deliver. In doing so, I made a departure from the pre-given and *avant-garde* conceptions of bourgeois agency, thereby attempting to overcome the ahistorical readings of historical change in Turkey.

Rejecting the pre-given conceptions of social class, however, no way implies a directionless history nor does it trivialize the issue of historical transitions. Rather, I suggest history be understood as a “structured process” in which class actors reproduce themselves in historically-specific ways and under conditions shaped by past social struggles (Thompson 1995, pp. 67–68). Classes struggle to maintain themselves as they are, and while doing so, in the long-run, they unintentionally combine new forms of property relations with pre-existing ones (Brenner 2007). From this angle, perhaps it would be more fruitful to view Turkey’s “great transformation” partly as an “unintended” outcome of past social struggles, rather than driven by transhistorically-defined class interests. What requires further explanation then would be the critical historical context in which the bourgeoisie in Turkey transformed into a fully-capitalist bourgeoisie, a process partly imposed on them partly realized by them (*cf.* Chibber 2003). This question is already shaping my future research agenda.

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