
DOSSIER ON URBAN CLASSES AND POLITICS IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA: TURKEY IN COMPARISON

Editor's introduction: Class and politics

Biray Kolluoğlu

Social classes are fading away. They are fading away as forms of identity with which groups associate themselves; they are fading away as anchors of social movements; and they are fading away as objects of study from social scientists' agenda. This was the shared opinion of one of our Editorial Board meetings in 2009. Not having much power to intervene on the first two accounts, we decided that we still could do something about bringing social class back onto the agenda of social scientists. We could organize a conference and invite scholars to share their work on social classes or to rethink their work through the prism of social class. Hence a conference entitled "Urban Classes and Politics in the Neoliberal Era: Turkey in Comparison" was held in October 2010. The objective was to instigate a scholarly debate on social classes in urban Turkey, in comparison to other regions such as South Asia and Latin America.

In the conference announcement, as the editors, we argued the following: The processes of globalization and neoliberalism have brought into sharp focus the tensions and transformations in urban regions in diverse semi-peripheral contexts, from Asia to Latin America. Scholarship on social change since the liberalization of the economy in the 1980s in Turkey has focused on issues such as the rise of Islamism, nationalism, and identity politics, and how these are echoed in metropolitan urban space in terms of political tensions, social exclusion, urban redevelopment, and culture and consumption. Although these processes are triggered by and have consequences along various axes of social stratification, scant analytical attention has been paid to social class. Another neglected area is the urban transformation in Turkey's provinces. Except for a handful of

Biray Kolluoğlu, Boğaziçi University, Department of Sociology, 34342, Bebek-Istanbul, Turkey, biray@boun.edu.tr.

Editor's Note: The conference was jointly organized by *New Perspectives on Turkey* and the Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

New Perspectives on Turkey, no. 46 (2012): 15-25.

studies on the economic growth of the so-called "Anatolian tigers," few scholars have analyzed the new bourgeoisie, the middle classes and the expansion of the laboring classes in urban centers in Anatolia. Likewise, there is a lack of studies on the connections between Islamic networks and employment and labor relations, and between conflict-induced migration and proletarianization.

We invited participants to rethink processes of urban change in the neoliberal era in Turkey and in selected countries in Asia and Latin America, by using social class as an analytical category. We wanted to probe issues such as the following: how are urban transformations ranging from Islamism to poor people's political activism, from neoliberal urban spaces to consumption practices, from labor movements to middle class politics related to changing class configurations and formations?

In the end, we had a most interesting meeting to discuss a wide array of issues, from the structure of the Turkish middle class to the transnationalization of class relations in Latin America. The participation was very high and the discussions very animated, both of which speak to the fact that there was indeed a need and an urge to talk about the issues on the agenda. Four of the participants later on turned their presentations into articles to be published in this special dossier. In introducing these articles, I would like to embed a brief discussion of the four articles in a general discussion of this conference and the main theme that it tried to pursue. By conveying the spirit the conference, I am hoping to prepare the background for some of the reflections on the fading of social class.

Çağlar Keyder set the tone of the conference in his keynote speech, in which he argued that the new middle class is not as novel as we usually make it out to be. He reminded us that very similar discussions were carried out at the turn of the twentieth century when instead of disappearing, as Marx had argued, this group in the middle was solidifying its position. Keyder also underlined the significance of education in the production and reproduction of the middle class in various historical contexts. Ayşe Buğra and Osman Savaşkan presented a picture of the business world in Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party in the past decade, which they developed further into an article that is included in this dossier. They focus on the changes in the structure of the bourgeoisie, complicated by the increasing significance of Islam, the rise of Anatolian capital, and the spatial relocation of industry. Their contribution is very significant in documenting the different forms of state intervention to actively shape the structure of the bourgeoisie in a neoliberal order through legislative and administrative mechanisms, through business associations, and at the local level. Ayşe

Durakbaşa, Meltem Karadağ, and Gül Özsan in their joint presentation talked about the different ways in which local notables have been marking their presence in the urban scene in those provinces where Buğra and Savaşkan mapped out the rise of the Muslim bourgeoisie.

Henrike Donner's presentation and paper offer an opportunity to consider the remarkable parallels between the middle classes in India and in Turkey. She mainly discusses Kolkata's, but also Delhi and Mumbai's middle classes as they enable and benefit from the neoliberal transformation of their cities. She begins with an observation about the expansion of the middle class and weaves her story together with the overlapping of the demands of these upwardly mobile sections of the population and the planning and execution of various urban restructuring and regeneration projects in major Indian big cities. Donner writes that neoliberal urban politics is driven by the needs of a global middle class of Indian origin and results in the exclusion of the urban poor, often in terms of middle class livelihoods and consumption practices through the language of "needs," "demands," and "markets."

Donner's analysis once again opens our eyes not only to the similarities between the urban middle classes in Kolkata and İstanbul and other big cities in the world, but perhaps more importantly to the similarities of the relevant sociological and anthropological analyses in Turkey and elsewhere. In Turkey as elsewhere, the "new middle classes" take center-stage in the analysis of neoliberal urban spatial practices. In other words, as big cities around the world begin to look more alike with office towers, shopping malls, luxury hotels, entertainment complexes, and gated communities, the users and inhabitants of these spaces are recounted in greater sophistication in terms of their practices, demands, and anxieties.

The laboring classes appeared in two ways in the presentations: as part of the big pictures, and as subjects of more focused analysis. Korkut Boratav, in his usual masterful style, provided us with a picture of the changes that the political economy of Turkey underwent in the past three decades and the changing position of the classes through these transformations. His presentation highlighted the turning points at which the national product was redistributed, away from the laboring classes towards the bourgeoisie, and especially its rentier elements. The so-called January 24, 1980 decisions were instrumental in this process, on the insistence of international financial institutions. The military coup on September 12, 1980 gave the final momentum to this massive assault against labor. Labor protests towards the end of the decade had a role in redressing some of that wealth redistribution, but as Turkey's economy adopted full liberalization in 1989, precipitating regular crises, the main

victims continued to be the laboring classes, while there were further redistributions of wealth to different segments of the bourgeoisie. William Robinson talked about the transnationalization of the social classes under globalization in Latin America. He has been arguing for some time that a transnational capitalist class is in formation.¹ At the conference, he pointed at processes that would allow a transnational working class to come into being, such as labor migration in the Americas. However, it is a matter of further debate whether the objective existence of these conditions will yield a transnational working class formation, one that would be a class-for-itself. All in all, although offering different levels of analysis, these talks implicitly hinted at the difficulties faced by the laboring classes in the neoliberal age, not only in terms of the attack on their livelihoods, but also in terms of possibilities for collective action.

The laboring classes, as subjects of more focused analysis, were first brought on the agenda with Cihan Tuğal's presentation, which appears in expanded form as an article in this dossier. Tuğal's article offers a rich account of the multifarious subjectivities of workers with irregular wages and precarious employment, which consists of values and perspectives not all of which are compatible with neoliberalism, in a squatter neighborhood in İstanbul. His study contributes to a literature that challenges the perspectives that present neoliberalism as a universal package. By showing us the various frictions and imperfections that neoliberalism faces in this geography, he is inviting us to think about the different ways in which "neoliberalism might be transformed, altered, or disturbed in the end." Tuğal's paper offers another very interesting argument: with all the complications and contradictions in their subjectivities, Tuğal's sub-proletarians define themselves as small businessmen (*serbest meslek sahibi*). They are small businessmen at least in aspiration, who perceive no sharp class distinctions between their current situations and life chances and those of small businessmen. In other words, in the most likely place where one could find non-middle class formations, one ends up finding groups who see themselves as such.

The laboring classes received further close consideration in Javier Auyero's presentation, the last essay in this dossier. Javier Auyero reflects on his past ethnographic research among the poor in Argentina and invites readers to examine a set of issues with which he has dealt over the years. In the light of his research he wants us to rethink patronage politics not only as vote recruitment strategy, but also as a problem-

1 William I. Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

solving strategy employed by the destitute, and clientelism and collective action not as opposing but intertwined fields. Auyero argues that the boundaries between insurgents and authorities are not as clear as usually assumed and shows how the severity of the environmental problems that the working classes and the poor have to face have been ignored. He opens a window onto the nitty-gritty of the daily lives of the poor and wants us to see how waiting is a way of experiencing political domination. Following the journey through these different issues, he presents us with the conclusion that social scientists work with “stylized facts” and “oversimplified descriptions generated by concepts and notions which usually fail to capture the fine-grained, micro-sociological processes at work.” It is very hard to disagree with Auyero’s argument. This is indeed a “social fact” we all know too well. So well in fact that we usually prefer to put it aside when looking into different worlds, especially worlds whose practices, fabric, rules of engagement, and structures of affect are so alien to ours that we fall back onto the comfort of “stylized facts” and the latest and most sophisticated conceptualizations. I find this to be a timely reminder that connects me to some of my concluding observations and afterthoughts on the issue of social class.

The remains of these meetings, the discussions they instigated, and the writing that came out of them, at least according to this editor, is that despite the initial motivation and our enthusiasm for bringing social class back in, we ended up talking not only more, but also more comfortably, about the middle class. The middle class was rendered visible through its attributes, its effects, its affects, and its politics. The laboring classes are becoming paler and paler in the big pictures and more difficult to understand, even close up with the tools we have at hand.

Trying to reflect on this, I came across a piece by Slavoj Žižek, in which he tackled the problem of having to make a choice between class struggle and “dispersed multiple identities,” or “an irreducible lucid plurality of struggles.” He warns that this “false alternative” puts at stake “the (im)possibilities of radical thought and practice today.”² I found Žižek’s formulation eye-opening, not because of the profoundness of the observation, but precisely because of its simple candidness. Despite the fact that our discourse and analysis have become ever more sophisticated, elaborate and progressive, our politics have become less and less effective and, dare I say, less oppositional. It seems that radical politics is running against a myriad of walls, some of which it has erected and most of

2 Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, eds. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (2000), 90–91.

which have been put in place by neoliberal social and economic arrangements that increase the impossibilities rather than the possibilities.

The impossibility that Žižek emphasizes here has a lot to do both with the ways in which the middle class constructs itself through its own experiences and the appropriation and articulation of this process by social scientists. The latter owes greatly to Auyero's above-mentioned "stylized facts" and "oversimplified descriptions" that social scientists readily apply in their engagements, not only to the laboring classes, but also to the middle class. The only class that is politically articulated is the middle class, writes Wendy Brown, whose articulation and naming normalizes, not politicizes capitalism. "Poised between the rich and the poor, feeling itself to be protected from the encroachments of neither, the phantasmatic middle class signifies the natural and the good between the decadent or the corrupt, on the one side, and the aberrant or the decaying, on the other."³ She makes another interesting point: the middle class, by being the sole class occupant of the contemporary scene, not only naturalizes and depoliticizes capitalism, but also defines politics as such by "embodying an ideal to which non-class identities refer for proof of their claims to injury and exclusion." Gays and lesbians, people of color, and women name their problems and privations by referencing an ideal middle class. She asks "to what extent a critique of capitalism is foreclosed by the current configuration of oppositional politics," and if this could be so, why is class always named but rarely theorized in the multiculturalist mantra of "race, class, gender, sexuality"?⁴

Brown's point transcends the conventional criticisms of identity politics that pits politics of "recognition" against politics of "redistribution," or attempts that try to reconcile them by first marking their differences and then mediating them.⁵ The conceptualization of once "new" struggles organized around sexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity under the banner of "identity politics" and the counterpoising of these struggles against working class movements within academia were informed by both the disillusionment with and the end of existing socialisms, the rise of post-structuralism, and the dissolution of welfare and developmentalist regimes. Hence, in a way, class as an analytical tool or political project was still present, even if only as a specter that needed to be fought, reconciled with, or conjured back to life.

3 Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 395.

4 Ibid.

5 Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist Age'," *New Left Review*, no. 212 (1995).

The contours of the debate have further shifted in the last decade of the twentieth century, towards the study of Foucauldian conceptualizations of ubiquitous power that takes hold of the body *per se* (individualizing) and of the species body (totalizing). This has carried the axis of the discussion to the relation between strategies of domination and technologies of self construction. The appearance in print and in English of Foucault's now renowned lectures at the Collège de France, especially of "Security, Territory, and Population" (1977-1978) which is essentially on governmentality, and "The Birth of Biopolitics" (1978-1979) which is an analysis of the birth of neoliberalism, have been pivotal to for adding to the agenda and popularizing the interest in subjectivity under neoliberalism.⁶ These lectures have provided the language and imaginary for the ensuing analysis. What we have seen since the 1990s is an ever-growing "literature on neoliberalism as a biopolitical form of governmentality [...] which locates the question of subjectivity at the heart of social reproduction." Within this paradigm, the shift in the regime of accumulation from Keynesian/New Deal to neoliberal is understood "as primarily a shift at the level of subjectivity even if this shift is induced by the state and its various agencies, procedures, regimes of truth, and principles of formalization."⁷

In his 1979 lectures, Foucault talked about the liberal and neoliberal forms of government and traced the crisis of liberal governmentality to the Freiburg School liberals of the 1930s, who were associated with and contributed to the journal *Ordo*. Through them, Foucault drew out the fundamentals of neoliberalism: a society is no longer regulated by the exchange of commodities, but by mechanisms of competition; where the sought-after subject is the man of enterprise;⁸ where one governs for the market, not because of the market; where fundamental principles of eighteenth-century liberalism are completely reversed.⁹ He also studied neoliberalism in the USA, arguing that the Chicago School version was

6 The emergence of the literature on governmentality in the Anglo-Saxon context can be traced back to the publication of Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller's edited volume Graham Burchell et al., eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). This volume includes two lectures by Foucault and articles by others, which introduce and rework themes from these lectures in general.

On the popularization of the concept of governmentality and its widespread impact in the English-speaking world, see Jacques Donzelot and Colin Gordon, "Interview: Governing Liberal Societies – the Foucault Effect in the English-Speaking World," *Foucault Studies*, no. 5 (2008).

7 Yahya Madra and Ceren Özselçuk, "Jouissance and Antagonism in the Forms of the Commune: A Critique of Biopolitical Subjectivity," *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 3 (2010): 483.

8 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 147.

9 *Ibid.*, 121.

much more radical, complete and exhaustive. American neoliberalism generalizes the economic form of the market to social relationships and individual behavior. Hence the terms of the market become applicable to non-economic domains.¹⁰

These observations resurface in various interpretations with increasing frequency in the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, Ong writes that neoliberal governmentality “informs action by many regimes and furnishes the concepts that inform the government of free individuals who are then induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness.”¹¹ Talking about the shifts of the last quarter of the twentieth century, Rose argues that “[t]hese modifications in rationalities and technologies of government have also involved an increasing emphasis on the responsibility of the individuals to manage their own affairs, to secure their own security with a prudential eye on the future.”¹² Put differently, Foucault’s above-mentioned “man of enterprise” and “enterprise society” is embodied in the neoliberal subject who is self-animating, self-governing, optimizing, competitive, entrepreneurial, and efficient. The closer one looks at this subject, the more it resembles the middle class subject. Even a critic who sees the embedded problem in the construction of such a subject capable of “calculating his/her capacities and calibrating his/her conduct” cannot stray too far from an imaginary of the middle class and concludes that the neoliberal subject is not governed by these rationalities, but is a subject who “governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties.”¹³ Hence, neoliberal subjectivity as embodied and exemplified in the middle class self reaches a state of omnipresence and Janus-faced existence in many critical texts, largely reducing all other classes to either a simple imitation or negative definition of the only Promethean class of the late capitalist age.

I am not trying here to undermine the richness of analysis that has been produced within what we may call the Foucauldian paradigm. There is no doubt that working with the perspective that the notion of governmentality has opened up has lifted the veil from the mystery of the state/civil society problematic which has engaged so many over the past half century.¹⁴ The focus on governmentality has also proven to be

10 Ibid., 243.

11 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

12 Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

13 Engin F. Isin, “The Neurotic Citizen,” *Citizenship Studies* 8, no. 3 (2004): 222-223.

14 See Andrew Barry et al., *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and the Rationalities of Government* (Routledge, 1996).

very productive in the ways in which especially the neoliberal project has been so successful. Thomas Lemke argues that the concept of governmentality is important because it enables a reading of neoliberalism "as a political project that endeavors to create a social reality that it suggests already exists." Neoliberalism is a political rationality that subsumes the social to the economic and increases "personal responsibility" and "self-care." It is a technique of power that calls not only on individual, but also collective bodies to be "lean," "fit," "flexible," and "autonomous." Neoliberalism does not just replace former regulatory mechanisms through new self-regulation techniques, but these effects "are the product of a re-coding of social mechanisms of exploitation and domination on the basis of a new topography of the social domain." If this analysis is valid, writes Lemke, then "political analysis must start to study the 'autonomous' individual's capacity for self-control and how this is linked to forms of political rule and economic exploitation."¹⁵ This is indeed what happens. Subjectivity studies that have either directly fed on, or have been inspired by, or have poured into the field opened up by the concept of governmentality begin to talk and see through the "neoliberal subject." The unit of analysis ultimately becomes the individual. This individual, as we have seen above, is very much, if not defined by, then at least imagined through the attributes, affects, and anxieties of the new middle classes in the neoliberal era.

Allow me a final caveat to explicate the potential problems embedded in focusing on the question of subjectivity and hence the individual. In outlining his history of neoliberalism, Foucault goes back not only to the ordoliberalists of the Freiburg School, but also to the Frankfurt School. He is interested in the parallels between these two groups, dispersed and forced into exile, who are writing at the same time. They both emerge from Max Weber who, according to Foucault, had displaced Marx's problem. While Marx was interested in "the contradictory logic of capitalism," Weber was interested in the "irrational rationality of capitalist society." Both the Frankfurt and the Freiburg School pick up this thrust of Weber and take it into two different directions. While Frankfurt School intellectuals searched for "a new rationality to nullify economic rationality," Freiburg School intellectuals were in search of an "economic rationality that will make it possible to nullify the social irrationality of capitalism."¹⁶ "Foucault's sense of affinity with Weber," which Colin

15 Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 203.

16 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 105-106. See also Colin Gordon, "Questions, Ethos, Event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment," in *Foucault's New Domains*, eds. Mike Gane and Terry Johnson (Rout-

Gordon points at, surfaces in his “sympathetic treatment” of ordoliberalism, especially in their shared interest in the Weberian theme of the ethical conduct of life.¹⁷ This thread becomes increasingly visible in studies that look at rationalities and technologies of government surrounding the processes of “subjectification.” Donzelot articulates his unease with this approach that sees subjects as “entrepreneurs of themselves” who are defined by their active choices and the risks they take, and who are responsible for themselves. The endless and endlessly varied descriptions of this “equation of the simultaneous growth of the individual autonomy and responsibility” become the intellectual enterprise itself. Such an intellectual enterprise leads to the rationalization of the same set of policies that it set out to criticize.¹⁸

I would like to conclude with another simple and candid observation. For Žižek, the move away from the privileging of economic class struggle, with all its gains aside in terms of recognizing the plurality of forms of domination, power, and struggles, is a “resignation at its heart—the acceptance of capitalism as ‘the only game in town,’ the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing capitalist liberal regime.”¹⁹ Apart from the endeavor to develop an intimate and thorough understanding of the neoliberal subject, which ultimately mirrors the crushingly successful neoliberal project’s focus, we need to look at the categories that the neoliberal project has rendered redundant and on the basis of whose redundancy it has managed to declare itself the only game in town. Is it not time to play other games? We hope that the articles in this dossier will contribute to the revival of a critical discussion of capitalism and social classes.

References

- Barry, Andrew, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose. *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and the Rationalities of Government*: Routledge, 1996.
- Brown, Wendy. “Wounded Attachments.” *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390-410.
- Burchell, Graham, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Donzelot, Jacques, and Colin Gordon. “Interview: Governing Liberal Societies – the Foucault Effect in the English-Speaking World.” *Foucault Studies*, no. 5 (2008): 48-62.

ledge, 1993); Mike Gane, “Foucault on Governmentality and Liberalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7-8 (2008).

Foucault notes the following irony: “In 1968 the last disciples of the Frankfurt School clashed with the police of a government inspired by the Freiburg School, thus finding themselves on opposite sides of the barricades, for such was the double, crossed, antagonistic fate of Weberianism” (106).

17 Gordon, “Foucault on Kant,” 28-29.

18 Donzelot and Gordon, “Interview,” 54.

19 Žižek, “Class Struggle,” 95.

- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Fraser, Nancy. "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist Age'." *New Left Review*, no. 212 (1995): 68-93.
- Gane, Mike. "Foucault on Governmentality and Liberalism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7-8 (2008): 353-363.
- Gordon, Colin. "Questions, Ethos, Event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment." In *Foucault's New Domains*, edited by Mike Gane and Terry Johnson, 19-35: Routledge, 1993.
- Isin, Engin F. "The Neurotic Citizen." *Citizenship Studies* 8, no. 3 (2004): 217-235.
- Lemke, Thomas. "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality." *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 190-207.
- Madra, Yahya, and Ceren Özselçuk. "Jouissance and Antagonism in the Forms of the Commune: A Critique of Biopolitical Subjectivity." *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 3 (2010): 481-497.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Robinson, William I. *Latin America and Global Capitalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Rose, Nikolas. *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, edited by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, 90-135, 2000.