

## The State and Contentious Politics:

### The New Course of the Kurdish Question in Turkey's Neo-liberal Epoch

*September 2004*<sup>1</sup>

#### Daily Routines of Children

“I was invited by Isa to his house to have lunch with his mother and siblings. ‘My sisters will love you. You are a good role model for them. I want them to study, like you,’ he said to me to convince me to go to the lunch. His father was disappeared by the security forces in 1992 when Isa was 14 years old and his youngest brother was just couple of months old, and his family was forced by the army to leave their village on 1993. Now he lives in one of Diyarbakir’s inner city neighborhoods with his mother, three younger sisters and one 12 year-old brother...Isa said that he wants his brother Azat to be a script writer; ‘Azat likes theaters very much... He will do good things in the future, I promise! You will see him and then you will understand.’” he added. Isa had never attended the secondary school and when I asked him if he had a job, he said to me that he was “working for the struggle [*mücadele*]”. He wants the oldest sister Hacer to continue in the high school; “She is more into getting married. I would prefer her to think of her education. I couldn’t, but I tell her she can... ” His sister, Berfin opened the door with hesitation and a concerned look. After Isa introduced me [and my assistant] to her, she started smiling and admitted that I looked to her ‘like not from here’ and she thought at first I was an under cover cop. A female cop with civilian clothing had once been there to ask them about Isa’s whereabouts. Something had happened and they got suspicious that Isa was involved. They very likely knew that there would be no adult man in the household other than Isa, so they sent a female cop, “as tall as you are”, to ask them questions. “Isa did not do anything wrong” she said timidly... I told her that I was a Turk too. She said, “Yes, but you are a good one”...”

“After a while we entered the house, we heard children outside shouting the famous pro-PKK slogan ‘Biji Serok Apo!, Biji Apo Serok Apo!’ And then we heard the security patrols shouting back to the children “Go to your homes children! don’t make us go in there!” Isa checked the street from his balcony and said to me, “This is children’s favorite game, going closer and closer to them, throwing small stones, running back into the neighborhood shouting ‘Biji Serok Apo!’” He started laughing, “This is so much fun to watch.” I asked him what the patrols would usually do as a reaction. He said to me that unless anything serious happens, they would do nothing. “At least not anymore”; before, they would run after the children, get some of them and maybe detain them for a while. Now they just remain passive. “They don’t even want to step into the neighborhood, afraid that things might get out of their control. Europe is watching; they can’t do anything, especially to small children,” he added. Then, I asked him if he knew the children and if they were from the displaced migrant families like that of his. He said, “All of them!” Unlike Isa, I was concerned not only because there are nothing more than children in Diyarbakir and these kids are socializing ‘playing’ with armed ‘security’ forces, who do not necessarily feel responsible for the security of those children, but also because that sympathy for a violent organization and its leader seems like it is turning into a religion in this geography ...”

(D. Gökalp, Field notes, summer 2004, Diyarbakir/Turkey).

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<sup>1</sup> All interviews and field notes used in this paper have been subject to serious IRB investigation. The names of all informants have been changed throughout the paper to protect anonymity.

March 28 2006

“Pawns of terrorism out of control!”

On March 28, 2006, a week after the relatively peaceful 2006 Newroz celebrations under extreme security surveillance, in the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in Southeastern Turkey, five thousand young Kurdish protestors clashed with the police after the funeral of 4 of the 14 Kurdish separatist guerillas killed by the Turkish army in an ambush in the mountainous areas of the region. The timing was interesting: two years after the last time the fighting restarted, the hopes that the PKK guerilla would be returned ‘with their dignity respected’ were shattered. The pro-Islamist government was retreating from its first attempt to resolve the “Kurdish Question”, realizing that any concessions the government was ready to make in the areas of ‘culture’ and ‘language’ would not be enough to gain the hearts of the radically politicized segments of the pro-Kurdish movement, which sees the PKK violence as legitimate and virtuous. They still demanded a special amnesty for the PKK guerilla and cadres, who are the accomplices of an armed violence that has claimed 40,000 lives in southeastern Turkey. Moreover, it was in the year 2006 that it finally became obvious to the Turkish Kurds that the EU adventure was coming to an end, and with it the hope that the EU could serve as a point of leverage to put further pressure on the state for the Kurdish demands. Thus, these mass protests might be one of the few chances left to exploit the push for the government to take some concrete steps with regard to the Kurdish demands for the sake of the EU negotiations.

Agitated protestors grew into fifteen thousand people in the second day of a week-long rampage and threw stones and petrol bombs at the Turkish security forces, smashed the windows of police stations, banks, post offices, local shops and public buildings whilst the Turkish army moved combat vehicles and armored personnel to the region and responded to the protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets. Pro-Kurdish municipality mayors, especially that of Diyarbakir Osman Baydemir, resisted denouncing the street violence; on the contrary, he expressed his sympathy for the guerillas killed and the protest participants in several occasions during the rampage. A legal investigation was also initiated for inciting violence and making pro-PKK propaganda about another pro-Kurdish party member who allegedly called the local people to join the protests during the PKK funerals. The pro-Kurdish media, including a Denmark-based pro-PKK television channel (Roj TV), devoted extensive coverage to the riots, praising the ‘courage’ of the young protestors. The Turkish state authorities and security personnel accused the pro-Kurdish party representatives in the region together with the TV channel of inciting and inflicting the violence. In a chain reaction, the street battles spread to the neighboring provincial centers (and with a less intensity to Istanbul), with thousands of Kurdish children and youth shouting pro-PKK slogans and attacking the Turkish security forces with stones and Molotov cocktails.

Interestingly enough, the Turkish security units acted in a ‘prudent’ manner and the events ended with relatively few casualties (16 deaths nationwide, at least 3 of them caused by the protestors), in comparison to the around one hundred which occurred as a result of the urban protests of 1992. Diyarbakir Police Chief was reported as ordering the police “not to fire at protestors unless absolutely necessary.” Diyarbakir provincial governor, Efkân Ala, a name close to the Justice and Development Party, but respected very much even by the PKK constituency among the local Kurds, stated, in the aftermath of the days-long rampage, that the majority of the protestors, predominately young people, were the children of the conflict-induced migrants who got displaced from the rural communities during the armed conflict between the Turkish security forces and the PKK in 1990s. His remarks did not find their true resonance among the general Turkish public, who are mainly unaware of the ‘forced’ nature of the village evacuations and/or perceive the state actions in the region as legitimate strategies to protect the territorial unity of the country against separatist threats. These particular days-long protest events were therefore cast by the state, the general Turkish media and public opinion as an abrupt instance of violence carried out by the “pawns of terrorism.” On the third day of the rampage, Prime Minister Erdogan stated that “no illegal acts will be tolerated”, indicating that any form of negotiation with the protestors and/or the PKK was out of the question. He also denied the wish of the pro-Kurdish political party representatives to have a meeting with him, basing this decision on the pro-Kurdish party’s refusal to denounce the PKK violence and call the PKK a terrorist organization. Those moments of violent mass contention would repeat in the near future across Turkey in 2007 and 2008.

## Introduction

For seven months in 2004, I was based in Diyarbakir conducting fieldwork for my dissertation among the displaced communities in the city center. My underlying goal was to understand the nature of the resocialization and politicization of these displaced communities as they recovered from the course of the violence brought about by the armed conflict and displacement beginning in the late 1980s, and growing exponentially in the 1990s. In retrospect, I can say that my latent expectation was not necessarily to find that the historical trajectory of violence and ethnic politicization traced back to the 1980s up until the present times condemned the actors I meant to study to a gradual but inevitable radicalization. Rather, mine was a more or less naïve hope for an emerging political consciousness among the displaced grassroots that could articulate and engage with the Turkish state in a quest for justice and rights. Based on a certain branch of the literature on the state and political violence, the new era following 1999 would contribute to the reformation and consolidation of the citizenship regime, and the articulation between the state and (Kurdish) citizens in the period of opportunity opened up by the temporary ending of the armed fighting, the lifting of the emergency rule in the region, the coming of the DEHAP to the municipalities and the start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations, all of which were happening right at the beginning of the 2000s. Nonetheless, my findings turned out to tell quite a complex tale, not the one of a lively scene of reconciliation enjoying the first intimations of civil society. Instead, the lesson seemed to be that the far-reaching complications associated with the political economic transformation prevailing in Turkey since the 1980s had impinged in unexpected ways on the social, political and cultural landscape that had emerged in southeast Turkey in the aftermath of the recent ethnicized political violence.

Displaced migrant communities were poor and/or landless peasant communities until the 1980s. De-ruralized in the cities, where they became an economically precarious underclass after their forced displacement, they remain one of the most vulnerable citizen groups in the region and across Turkey; a "suspicious," population for the state's security forces, a "residual" category in economic terms, an ossified constituency of the PKK and the guarantors of its representative, Democratic Society Party, in the Turkish Parliament. My analysis of social, economic and political processes of displacement revealed multi-faceted complexities that were the legacy of the socio-spatial and spatial-political structural changes wrought by the 'low intensity war' in southeastern Turkey, which had made the civilian places—cities, towns and villages- spaces of political contention, where any victim was likely to be a dissident and any daily civilian activity was likely to have a salient social, political, and military implications.

Studying the social, economic and political implications of the destruction of the countryside in southeastern Turkey during the course of the armed conflict has reminded me, time and time again, of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, his classic 1944 book on "embeddedness" and "double movement". I pushed my academic imagination to understand how the disturbed Kurdish peasant communities have responded (or "resisted" in Polanyi's terms) to "the destruction of the substance of [their] local communities" by violence. The "resistance" has been in terms of holding together in a struggle [or *mücadele*] in solidarity with an ethnically defined moral community antagonistic towards the "enemy", the perpetrators of the violence in people's eyes: the state, the army, and the betrayers of the *mücadele* (i.e. Kurdish Hezbollah members and Kurdish paramilitaries). In time, I have become more interested in understanding the articulation (or lack of it) between the state and the 'disturbed' local population in southeastern Turkey, convinced by my research that a focus on "ethnicity" and "identity," or "Kurdish nationalism" would estrange my work from the complexity of the politics at the hub of the Kurdish contention.

This issue has expanded beyond the region of its origin to all of Turkey, especially in the metropolitan centers, which all now host substantial Kurdish (forced) migrant communities.

Combining insights from fieldwork with careful research on the past and present manifestation(s) of Kurdish contentious politics in Turkey, I will present a provisional perspective on the Kurdish contention in Turkey since the 1980 military junta by identifying recently emerging spaces of contention at the ground level (*the blurred zones of state power/authority*) and delineating the routine politics of “ordinary Kurdish citizens” to understand both the nature of their engagement with the Turkish state and that of their propinquity with organized Kurdish politics around the PKK. By bringing in the question of the forces unleashed by neo-liberalism in Turkish politics and society, and the processes of political violence in southeastern Turkey, I seek to scrutinize the content, form and nature of the new phase (and face) of the Kurdish contention as a particular form of state-society alienation and antagonism, wherein the state’s *legitimacy*, and therefore *authority*, gets blurred and challenged by the everyday routines of a sector of (Kurdish) citizens. This group, after having experienced various forms of political violence at personal, familial and communal levels, is one of the most vulnerable and radicalized groups in southeastern Turkey, and the same can be said of the corresponding Kurdish migrant communities, which came out of them and scattered across metropolitan centers.

Poverty in the city centers prepared the ground for the ethnic politicization of unemployment, impoverishment and social exclusion, which combined with the already existing resentments over injustices and discriminations associated with ethnic status. The increasing strength of pro-Islamist party politics in southeastern Turkey added further complications to the political and ideological divisions among the Kurds in the region, creating the fragmentation, as well, that is attendant upon the articulation of distinct groups with the different party politics. What comes to the fore in this discussion is the declining state *legitimacy* in the eyes of the Kurdish citizens, and the lack of the state *capacity* in institutional, organizational and territorial terms to settle accounts with the past (pervasive state violence in the 1990s) and to respond to specific grievances, aspirations, expectations and demands. Hence, articulation and negotiation between the state and the (Kurdish) citizens fail to achieve any material reconciliation as contention and repression feed each other in a vicious cycle. I argue that this attests to a new stage in the crisis of the nation-state in Turkey under neo-liberal ascendancy.

### **Theoretical Considerations and the Global Connection**

I have come to see the 1980 military coup as a rupture or turning point that still underlies the way in which Kurdish politics unfolds. Starting from the late 1980s, Kurdish mobilization had gained a distinct ethnic tone and resorted to violence under propitious global circumstances, most notably, the creation of *de facto* Kurdish government in Northern Iraq after the first Gulf War in early 1990s. The political vacuum left in international relations right after the collapse of the Soviet Block directly stimulated the separatist cause of an ethnic entrepreneur like the PKK. The PKK era was analytically different in kind from earlier forms of Kurdish riots and uprisings that had organized around tribal and religious establishments which had targeted the Turkish state, not necessarily because it was ‘Turkish;’ but rather because it was a ‘state’, a modern, centralized, secular one (Bozarlan 2000, also Yeğen 1999). Kurdish contention had been periodically repressed and/or co-opted by the Turkish nationalist movement (late Ottoman times and the early republican period) and Turkish party politics and political clientelism up until 1950s. That is a simplified story of a nation-state building dominated by the forces of the Kemalist revolution “from above” and somehow different than the European experiences where demands for social change “from below” had been significant in nation-state consolidation as well.

The original work on the state done by prominent scholars like Moore, Tilly and Skocpol is important to understand the social groups, classes and identities in relation to their roles in social movements, revolutions, social change and nation-state building. This strand of earlier research is still imperative and continues to provide historical insights about different paths countries in different continents have taken towards authoritarianism, dictatorship or democracy through different revolutionary moments in history. Moore was the first to acknowledge the power of peasant communities in triggering certain patterns of institutional change that led to such various outcomes as liberal democracy in France, communist dictatorship in Russia and China, and fascism in Germany and Japan. Skocpol, building on Moore, brought in a more nuanced emphasis on the importance of urban masses and (disturbed or destabilized) political structures in revolutionary success, while in her later work she became more involved with the state and political parties as agents of change in societies. Tilly's work has also been a unique contribution to the study of the state as well as collective violence: he conceived state-making as war-making, or, as organized crime (Tilly 1985).

Adding to the earlier western European experiences, the revolutionary moments of the 1960s further encouraged the students of social movements to appreciate the social forces "from below" in conditioning social change and democracy promoting institutional transformation. The 1960s also marked a unique era of social mobilization "from below" in Turkey evincing the potential power of the streets as a challenge to the state power; but did not last long. When the international socialist (or social democratic) movement gained its domestic salience in Turkey in the 1960s, Kurdish contention had shifted from varying forms of antagonism between the centralizing and modernizing state and the local power actors, as conditioned by the Kemalist nation-state building process, to a commitment on the side of a left-wing, class-based politics, aiming to articulate the problems of the Kurdish masses marginalized by the Turkish state and oppressed and exploited by the local power actors or tribal entities. That was a quite unique opportunity in the name of the Kurdish masses in the countryside alienated and marginalized by the state and oppressed and exploited by the tribal system for centuries.

And something happened from the 1960s to the 1980s that redefined not only the course of the Kurdish politics and contention in Turkey, but also the nature of the social movements and their articulation with modern states in the developing world in general (see for example, Fraser 2003, Kousis 2004 and Foweraker 2005). Academic faith in social change "from below" started to diminish substantively following the experiences of the non-western world with unprecedented levels of repression and state violence throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s. If we conceive the state in terms of a political space enabling articulation between its governmental institutions and the social groups and classes, that political space shrank drastically with suppression of the class-based movements, leaving great numbers, and sometimes even the majority, of people out of meaningful political participation in decision-making and social change.

Suppression of the class-based mobilizations went hand in hand with neo-liberal ascendancy around the world. Beinin (2001) argues at end of his analysis on class-based social mobilization in the contemporary Middle East, incorporating the Turkish experience too, that "Democracy did not do well in the era of neo-liberal ascendancy." Suppression of the peasants and workers movements in the 1960s and 70s hurt the limited chances of democratic opening in many countries of the Middle East while, at the same time, politicizing and militarizing the Islamist groups. Moreover, the "nation-state" was not "in-making" anymore, but rather "in retreat" on several fronts (for instance, economic, but also social and political- the space where the state and civil society is supposed to intersect) threatening its very foundations particularly in economically and politically vulnerable geographies. The state was however, still capable of employing violence against the domestic and international "enemies" as much as it had been before, if not

more. This tendency was stipulated by the rise of global, market-oriented neo-liberal policies (a framework that includes the privatization of public resources, the commodification of state operations, the diminution of labor's bargaining power through attacks on the unions, the discrediting of the state's social insurance policies, and the decentralization).

The local implications of this transformative trajectory along which nation-states in the developed as well as less developed world have been traveling has long been questioned by various scholars. Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein, in their prescient piece written for an international conference in Starnberg, Germany in 1991, warned that the consequences of the decline of state power and the strengthening of the market-oriented economy would destabilize modern states and all hope for social democratic consolidation:

The declining capacity of the states severally to moderate, within their respective jurisdictions, the workings of the capitalist world-economy carries corrosive consequences for state rule. The old left movements--the Communist parties, the national liberation movements, the Social-Democratic parties, the trade-union federations--were moral communities as well as organizations with leaders, cadres, and members. On gaining or participating in state power they endowed that complex of relations of rule with their popular moral support ("our" state), making the power "legitimate" and so in Weber's sense "authority," and thus making both exercise of it and obedience to it morally expected. No set of beliefs however, both Marx and Durkheim tell us, is an historical given that just persists; the legitimacy of state power, as domain of social consciousness, proves evanescent when not recurrently reinforced--yes, by rites (bread and circuses), but more enduringly by the daily relations of rule and compliance being popularly appraised as consistent, in effect as well as in form, with the guiding beliefs and ideals of the dominant moral community, the "national" community.

(Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1991:233)

Around the same time, Boratav in Turkey warned of the changing relations of distribution starting from the 1980s that would lead to "obscurantism" and "de-politization" in Turkish society:

...the 1970s when a new urban culture was starting to emerge within the working class. This was a period when in the daily lives of the urban masses the working place and the trade union were becoming more and more central compared with the 'residential quarters' and the shanty town; when 'working in a factory' and 'having the status of a regular worker, belonging to the workers' insurance scheme' had significantly higher prestige than survival in informal activities; and when increased inflow from the ranks of worker and peasant families into university campuses was taking place. The striking reversal in these tendencies should be, in our view, related to the distinct shift into religious obscurantism, de-politicization and the emergence of hooliganism in urban centers as widespread new phenomena of the recent years.

(Boratav 1990: 225-26)

In this context, Polanyi's *the Great Transformation*, wherein he explains the historical trajectory that led from liberal economics to fascism and dragged the world to the bloodshed of the WWII, has regained its relevance, since we see similar dynamics developing under the "neo-liberal ascendancy." Once again, the substance and ethos of local communities --let them be de-ruralized peasants and workers or urban poor, informal labor, indigenous communities, (im)migrants and minorities-- are destroyed in the name of an economics of growth; once again, marginalization goes hand in hand with rising nationalism, racism, conservative politics, and ethnically and religiously construed violence in the non-western and the western world. Even before the Cold War ended, Apter was warning of the "specter of superfluous man"

Marginalization... is a condition resulting from prolonged functional superfluousness. Marginals are people who not only do not contribute to the social product, they consume more than they produce. ... In turn, if deindustrialization produces endemic marginalization, then the state is set for violence, the search for disjunctive moments, for a world turned upside down.

(Apter 1987: 316)

Does Apter blame and further victimize the victim by his notion of the “specter of superfluous man”? Yes and no. One can say that he commits two large errors of perception in his account. First, it is an oversimplification to reduce these processes entirely to deindustrialization, when what needs to be further questioned is the political and economic processes creating marginalization in society. Instead of de-industrialization standing alone as a social cause of alienation, I think it has to be coupled with the changes undergone by the nation-state, which systematically diminished the importance and power held by societal actors in terms of their participatory potential to effect political change. Those societal actors became less “relevant” for the state favoring economic liberalization, as party politics started to dominate the intersection between the state and society, while the space of intersection has been diminished. Hui (2006, p.38) defines this transition as following: “As a result, the meaning of democracy shifted from popular to representative forms, the nation-state was transformed from a political space to an institutionalized structure of rule, and party politics from a struggle for representation into a power-distribution mechanism.”

Second, states have continued to be the main perpetrators of violence across the globe within or across borders or on the streets before and after the end of the Cold War, not the marginalized masses, which lacked the state’s organized armies and police and security forces. However, the answer to whether Apter blames the victim is also a no, if Apter was just pointing to the declining power of the underprivileged to organize and mobilize around socially grounded agendas and discourses to change the system or ask for change. The underprivileged groups are no longer the peasant communities as change agents with economic value, as in Moore’s comparative historical work, or urban masses and social classes in industrial societies, who were privileged in the accounts that Skocpol, Tilly and their followers gave, all of them believing ultimately in a democratizing and transformative potential in these economically and politically relevant social classes of industrial societies. The underprivileged is now becoming “irrelevant” for social change economically and politically; further disoriented in terms of their social interests, and fragmented by their politicized identities, as these are increasingly construed around ethnic and religious solidarities instead of shared social and economic situation or status.

Those marginalized masses—let them be the North African immigrants torching cars in the suburbs of French cities, or the Kurdish youth throwing Molotov cocktails to the police in Istanbul and Diyarbakir, or Al-Qaeda militants attacking the twin towers in NYC—are all marked by an “irrelevance” vis-à-vis the interests of the corresponding hegemonic actors. Yugoslavia was dismantled when Yugoslavian economy became “irrelevant” for the Global economy (Denich 2003). Al-Qaeda turned its violence towards the US and attacked the twin towers when the mujahidin organization that fought the Soviets in Afghanistan became “irrelevant” to American interests in Central Asia after the Cold War (Mamdani 2005). The recent wave of racism and right-wing politics together with rising unemployment have unfolded as further marginalization for those masses with African origin in France; they in turn became economically and politically less “relevant” –if not a threat-- to the interests of the general French society and politics (Wievorka 2003).

By the end of the Cold War, the older form of class-based contention was rapidly replaced by ethnic and religious politicization, which enabled the pursuit of economic liberalization in socialist states like Yugoslavia and Soviet Union or developmentalist states like Turkey, subtly supported by the international guardians of neo-liberalism (Deluguian 2005; also see Mamdani 2005 and Tilly 2002). Indeed, there is hardly anything surprising about the timing of the Kurdish unrest in Turkey, following as it does on the heels of the 1980 army intervention, when the decision was reached to prepare the grounds for a market-oriented politics, society and economy. Referring to civil wars in Latin America in the 1980s, for example, Seligmann (2003: 118) notes three main characteristics of the state-society relations in the periphery nations of the post-Cold War era; a violent movement in the name of ethnicity, the imposition of neoliberal economic doctrine and a rhetorical commitment to democracy. In East European Socialist regimes, the “revolutionary” forces of the late 1980s became engaged with three main ideals: “free markets,” “liberal democracy” and “joining the West (i.e. the EU)”. Meanwhile, those regions wherein the industrial basis and class-based organizing was the weakest, and the ethnic mingling was the most complex (especially Bosnia in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus in Soviet Union), were bloodily torn apart under the slogans of democracy and liberalization (Derluguian 2005).

According to Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1991), in Western Europe, restructuring of “the institutions, customs, and values” were ensured and incorporated by the systemic forces in the 1960s and 70s, though following quite different paths in France, Italy and Spain; but institutional restructuring eventually tamed and accommodated the new intellectualized strata of professionals, ambitious class-conscious student organizations and the new educated working class by democratizing political institutions. This process was not only hindered, but also repressed violently by ruling elites intolerable towards the social power of the masses in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 70s. Rather than being engaged with a socially and institutionally grounded democracy promoting transition and transformation, as happened to a large extent in Western Europe in the 1960s and 70s, the agents of change in Eastern Europe in 1989 adopted and internalized an economic shock therapy that would shake the very foundations of their political stability and give ethnic entrepreneurs a golden opportunity to capture ambient dissatisfactions and fears.

The Turkish case, though not discussed by the three authors, was different primarily because there was no meaningful and effective social democratic movement around industrial conflict in the 1960s and 1970s that could articulate with the powerful bourgeoisie and the capitalist state apparatus and fuel the democratic restructuring of the governmental institutions, as happened in Western Europe (see Keyder, 1987). The Turkish experience was also different than the Eastern European experience because the limited social politicization with which the Kurdish contention was associated was repressed in the name of “order” and “democracy” (i.e. “restricted” or “guided” democracy) by two NATO supported army interventions in 1971 and 1980. This peculiar “liberal” democratic order embraced the economic shock doctrine in 1980 by deconstructing the nationalist developmental state, and did so about the same time that the socialist brethren in Eastern Europe started to experiment with the IMF policies. Interestingly, the complete financialization of economic markets in Turkey happened in 1989, the year that the socialist block collapsed, and the year that, reminded by Yeğen (2006), the PKK upsurge turned into a mass mobilization in southeastern Turkey.

Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein identify the end of socialism and national developmentalism with a quite explicit observation: “What the forces of change [they were mainly the army protected forces of capitalism in search of integration with Europe in Turkey] have yet to realize is that this road is leading them—or at least most of them—not to the promised land of North America but to the harsher realities of South America or worse.” (1991, p.231) The authors

contend that as non-western European periphery countries struggle with neoliberal transition restructuring the state, society and economic relations without meeting the contingencies of a socially and institutionally grounded democracy, the states would suffer a decline in their *capacity* to meet the aspirations, expectations and demands of their national constituencies as well as a deterioration in their *legitimacy* (therefore *authority*) in the eyes of those constituencies as “the dominant moral community, the “national” community.” (1991, p: 233) And this is how the “national” begins its journey in a self-undermining path wherein not only “national” legitimacy weakens in the eyes of various ethnic groups composing the “national” community, but also “secular” legitimacy; thus, civil society is challenged by the rise of religious politicization as communities organize themselves around ethnic and religious identities, which offer alternative “moral communities” for social groups and movements.

The decline in state legitimacy and authority would further be associated with political corruption (and state violence to repress societal dissent and any form of violent contention), and political and societal relational activities outside of law, out of reach of law and lawmakers, and out of civil surveillance of society (Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1991). As expected, at the end of the Cold War, *ethnic brokers* and *cultural entrepreneurs*-- as they are sometimes referred to in conflict studies literature-- instigated internal wars around ethnic solidarities in the former socialist states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, with strong implications in adjacent geographies and around the world. Ethnic entrepreneurs have been quite successful in creating new collective memories, re-imagining ethnic identities, identifying new “enemy-others,” advancing ethno-nationalist claims on grounds rooted in tendentious histories and defining the new social problems that arose from transformations in political economies in terms of ethnic differences (Volkan, 1997). Conforming to this pattern, the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) positioned itself as one of those ethnic actors in southeastern Turkey as well as in the neighboring countries and Europe in the 1980s. The target of the state violence became the PKK and its potential local constituency. From a theoretical perspective, the violence waged by the Turkish army against the elements of the PKK can be conceptualized as a result of the ‘unfinished’ character of the state-building project in southeastern Turkey (Yeğen 1999) and/or a part of the process of ‘state [re]making’ in presence of a separatist threat in the new era of de-nationalization (Tilly 1985).

While there are global structural forces common to Turkey and other geographies experiencing ethnicized violence and neoliberal transition concurrently at the end of the Cold War, it is equally important to consider what is historically, politically and socially specific to each context. I am therefore, interested in understanding how these global structural forces have been experienced by people in their respective local and domestic contexts, while the state structure was expected to transform into a new form under the influence of the twin forces of militarization within and across national borders and liberalization in the economy. I aim to examine how global/international forces interact with the social, economic and political characteristics of domestic and local spaces in defining ordinary people’s becoming a part of identity-invoking politics and activism that engage--though not always--with violence. More specifically, how did political violence unfold in southeastern Turkey in just the way it did? How did the Kurds on the ground experience what we call ‘ethnic conflict’ and ‘political violence’ in the 1990s? What are the current social, economic and political concerns and insecurities that affect state-citizen relations and state legitimacy in the eyes of the displaced and disadvantaged Kurdish citizens? I further address the following questions: Do these questions enable us to understand why there is, and will be, a constant (if not growing) support for the PKK in the region and why this support points to a genuine challenge to democracy? More importantly, do these questions inform us of the changing nature of state-society relations in Turkey and revisit the notions of what constitute democracy?

## **Ravages of Neoliberalism**

Since the 1980s, neo-liberal restructuring in the form of socio-economic and political capitulation to economic liberalization reduced even the inadequate forms of previous state provided welfare provisions in Turkey, as well as across the developing world. Economic reform programs embarked on under the authorization of the IMF have forfeited long-term development initiatives for short-term economic benefits and rent-seeking politics. Economic liberalization has not only created economic crisis, chronic inflation, and economic instability, but has also reduced accountability and transparency in the public sector, undermining civic organizing (see for example Öniş 1991 and Demir, 2005). Increasing socio-economic gaps between social classes, distributional injustice, and growing poverty and unemployment, together with political corruption entrenched in the rapid economic transformation in 1980s, have resulted in declining state legitimacy in the eye of the citizens as the “corrupt” state gradually abandoned its citizens and insulated the political decision-making mechanisms further from society. State legitimacy was in decline in the eye of the general society as “corruption rather than populism becoming the more appropriate term to describe the economic dimension of state-society relations” (Buğra & Keyder, 2006, p. 212). The war in southeast Turkey has further worsened the situation by channeling state resources toward military expenditures and introducing new decision-making dynamics—between the state bureaucracy, business interests, and the military—that are insulated from the general society (Öniş, 2000; Demir, 2004; see also Cam, 2005).

Although the years of national-developmental phase were not very promising for southeastern Turkey, the years following the economic liberalization of the 1980s have unfolded in terms of a disproportionate economic investment favoring the GAP (Southeastern Anatolian Project) region and agro-business, with limited or nonexistent public investment or economic opportunities available to the rest of the region. Along with the criminalization of economic activities, including smuggling, the regional economy almost collapsed during the conflict years, particularly in areas outside of the GAP. Contrasting with the region’s economically and socially disadvantaged situation, abundant natural resources (i.e. land and water) have gained strategic economic as well as political importance with the implementation of the GAP. The GAP project did actually help agricultural based industrialization in southeastern provinces like Gaziantep and Sanliurfa, which both remained relatively insulated from the armed conflict pervasive in the rest of the region. The spill over impact of GAP-related development in those provinces with agro-businesses has been evident from their relatively greater ability to absorb the incoming migrant population in their formal and informal economy. Large-scale landowners and big agro-businesses have benefited from the project to a large extent; however, the positive spill-over impact of the project in terms of employment creation and economic development has not yet been realized. Conflict-stricken provincial centers such as Diyarbakır and Van could not have benefited from those limited regional development sparkles as evinced with their limited urban economies unable to produce jobs in either formal or the informal economy. On the contrary, the GAP project has further contributed to the intra-regional inequalities in the southeast and further distorted the socio-economic disparities originating from the traces of pre-capitalist feudal system in the region. ‘Development’ initiatives together with the entrenchment of a distorted capitalist economy in the region worked against the well-being of the peasant masses in the southeast. (See for example Özer 1998, Karapinar 2005 also see M.E. Bozarslan 1966[2002]).

What else have been the evident consequences of the economic liberalization of the 1980s in the southeast? I asked this naive question to a Kurdish politician from a wealthy pro-state tribe, always affiliated with center-right political parties including the Motherland Party of Turgut Özal, in an interview in 2004; then Diyarbakir MP, Ali Ihsan Merdanoğlu from the Justice and

Development Party. Merdanoğlu first talked about the “enormously generous investment credit programmes” of the Motherland Party during the 1980s that were tailored to get the local and national business entrepreneurs to invest in southeastern Turkey. Trying not to put too much blame on Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party due to his tribe’s earlier party allegiance, he pointed out the commitment of the then government to create “a spirit of entrepreneurship” in the region to reduce poverty and regional disparities between eastern and western Turkey, projecting that new business would bring job opportunities for the local people. Merdanoğlu ended up with the following statement summarizing the general agonies of economic liberalization in Turkey:

You cannot expect these top-down investment initiatives to create a miracle in a region with terror and with no adequate infrastructure, no qualified human resources.... and with no entrepreneurial class with a culture of entrepreneurship. People who did not have a culture of business became businessmen. Can you imagine the consequences? Waste of resources, corruption and ‘ghost’ businesses....

(D. Gökalp, personal interview, July 6 2004, Ankara, Turkish Parliament)

And what was happening in the Political arena? The 1980s were rather an incubation period in political terms, when a decade of socio-political experience with drastic neo-liberal restructuring measures advocated by the IMF led to a massive increase in political corruption, nepotism, favoritism and mafiazation, coupled with depoliticization and demobilization in society. Following the initial phase of neo-liberal shock, nationalist and religiously inspired discourses started to strengthen their position in party politics in the 1990s. It was indeed the end of 1980s that Islamist politics started to gain ground in party politics and Islamist violence became overt in public. Islamist fundamentalist violence perpetuated both in the form of organized acts of groups such as Hezbollah and sporadic acts of individuals affiliated with the fundamentalist organizing including the massacre of 37 secular Turkish intellectuals in Sivas in 1993 occurred as domestic repercussions of the new phase in the politics of globalization that started at the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, Kurdish radicalism around the PKK started to find support among the grass roots and turned into a mass civil disobedience, marking 1989 as a turning point in southeastern Turkey (Yeğen 2006).

In 1994, local elections pointed out another facet of the changing dynamics of political identity in southeastern Turkey. The Pro-Islamist Welfare Party (RP) won a significant victory in the region after the self-withdrawal of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Labor Party (DEP) from the local elections. Election results were an indication of pro-Islamist politics’ gaining ground in the southeast as well as across Turkey. The pro-Islamists have until today remained as a viable alternative to the pro-Kurdish politics as well as a strong rival in the local government elections in the predominately Kurdish provinces. Indeed, constituencies of the Islamist politics and the pro-Kurdish politics have to some extent overlapped with each other in southeastern Turkey starting from the mid 1990s (see Öniş 2000, also see Ercan-Argun 1999). The victory of the pro-Islamists in southeastern Turkey in 2002 general elections and then in 2004 local government elections proved once again that Kurdish politics holds no political monopoly over southeastern Turkey and its predominately Kurdish population. The contingencies of local collectivities in the region may be defined in political, economic, ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal or ideological terms and can articulate with the state and party politics on any number of levels besides ethnicity. The social and ideological fragmentation in southeastern Turkey strongly suggests that the Kurdish Question cannot be understood simply as an ethno-nationalist problem, which would be resolved if the Kurds were granted an array of cultural rights or a form of political autonomy.

Indeed, decentralization, which is what the latter suggestion would amount to, would surely complicate the possibility of a meaningful state responsiveness to the social, economic and political quandaries in the region, creating a system that would deflect responsibility through devolving power and responsibilities to local governments (or municipalities), while creating ever more opportunities for clientelism. Decentralization has not yet produced solid democratic transformation at the local level in terms of participation and representation in decision making, but rather helped the Justice and Development Party and Democratic Society Party to enforce new forms of urban clientelism, patronage and nepotism around networks of “solidarities” for “good Muslims” and “yurtsever Kurds”. Furthermore, the questions that arise from the intersection of the neo-liberal regime and the conflict circumstances cannot be reduced to a question of democracy as it has been narrowly understood by the EU, along with some liberal intelligentsia. While the EU interest on individual and human rights as opposed to political and civil rights has already demoralized the Kurdish actors especially since 2004, the EU strategy falls within the neo-liberal ambit of dictating procedural reforms that are intended to contain and manage the socio-economic deterioration in southeastern Turkey rather than to find structural solutions for poverty, unemployment and redistributive injustice. As stated by Tugal;

While EU convergence criteria hold many promises for the Kurds politically, the same cannot be said for their socio-economic situation. The reforms dictated from Brussels are not intended to heal the imbalances that marketization creates, but to produce an environment in which it can proceed more safely. Rural Kurds have been among the hardest hit by the economic reforms, and the fifteen years of military campaigns and guerrilla war did much to destroy their traditional means of livelihood, stock-breeding, forcing them to migrate to eastern or western cities. (2007: pg)

Against this backdrop, my research proposes that the new phase of the Kurdish question unfolded post 1980 under a certain set of domestic transformation. It refers to the rapid domestic reconfigurations happening within the Turkish society, politics and economy as the role of the state vis a vis social groups and civil societies in Turkey has been redefined in the neo-liberal era. Certain changes were prefigured back in the 1960s-70s, but they only really gained their “neo” status starting from the 1980s, reaching their utmost audacity in the 1990s and 2000s. I contend that this neo-liberal trajectory, which takes shape as certain sectors of society are privileged over others, undermines not only the *capacity* of the state to respond to specific and diverse societal demands; but also undermines the *legitimacy* of the state in the eyes of those societal actors who see themselves as being marginalized from political decision-making. It includes the following: (1) the expropriation of public and economic assets at the expense of the general society, in tandem with the changing role assumed by the state as it bestow economic and political protection upon the privileges of the privileged; (2) the institutionalization of political corruption as a *natural* consequence of a market-oriented economy, consumerist society, and the emergence of the depoliticized politics around ethnic, nationalist and religiously inspired discourses; (3) the decay of the political space available for civic consciousness and civil society; and (4) the shift from legalized forms (though not necessarily legitimate) to illegal state violence, often involving underground activities enmeshed in the illegal relational networks between the state (including the police and armed forces), society (neopatrimonial communities of patronage) and business.

How did this domestic transformation under the imposition of an economic liberalization agenda unfold in southeastern Turkey starting from the late 1980s?

## The Gray Zones of State Power and Violence in Southeastern Turkey

### *Low Intensity War, Low Intensity Democracy, Low Intensity Citizenship: Attempts to Recapture State Power Fire Back*

Thinking of the armed conflict years in southeastern Turkey, I find O'Donnell's notion of "brown areas" particularly helpful to examine the state-society relations where the state was unable to fully institutionalize and legitimize its authority as well as to assure democracy to the same extent as the rest of the country. Drawing on O'Donnell (1993), Auyero (2005:50) redefines the "brown areas" as the "Gray Zones of State Power" where violence is inevitable:

"neofeudalized regions" where "the obliteration of legality deprives the regional power circuits, including those state agencies, of the public, lawful dimension without which the national state and the order it supports vanish" (1993:1359). In these areas, state organizations become part of privatized circuits of power; the public dimension of the state evaporates. In these areas, political parties are "personalistic machines" dominated by familism, prebendalism, and/or clientalism. In these areas, finally, we have a "democracy of low-intensity citizenship."

As the neo-liberal army intervention in 1980 created the foundation of the new depoliticized party politics inspired by ethnic, nationalist and Islamist discourses, all of which gained ground in the 1990s, the weakened state apparatus failed in its role as a social, economic, legal and political guarantor for the large segments of the national constituency, especially the disadvantaged Kurds caught in the violence raging between the Turkish security forces and the PKK in southeastern Turkey. When the "low intensity war" in southeastern Turkey spread political violence across civilian Kurdish communities in rural areas as well as urban centers in the region, political contention also infiltrated to the grass roots *en masse* and conditioned by the PKK influence.

During the course of the armed conflict in the 1980s, but particularly in the 1990s, the gray (or blurred) zones of state power the territorial and political spaces wherein the Kemalist state had diligently tried to consolidate the state and its governmental institutions in earlier Republican times could be mapped over spaces of the new dissidence, filled with competing actors tied together in war-induced networks of power. The Kemalist government had outlined an ambitious program of centralizing and modernizing the 'uncivilized' centrifugal tribal elements<sup>2</sup>, which was enfolded following the economic program of the national developmentalist state of the ISI era through attempts to 'develop' and industrialize the 'backward' economy.<sup>3</sup> The implementation of

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2 Not only through coercion, but also through ambitious projects such as Land Reform and Village Institutions that could not be implemented due to various domestic and international reasons. Following the transition to a multiparty regime in 1940s, under political party competition through patronage relations, it has even become more difficult to implement a land reform in southeastern Turkey which has been a major hindrance for overcoming poverty, achieving even economic development in the region and ensuring intra-regional redistributive justice.

3 Through clientelism, existing systems of exploitative power dynamics, based on socio-economic relations embedded in the tribal/feudal system of concentration of land in the hands of few, were redefined by the central state as it marginalized the peasant communities that were dependent on the very same system. Coupled with the uneven penetration of the capitalist economy in the region after 1950s, socio-economic development trajectories worked for further marginalization and impoverishment of the peasant communities. Local communities were left in a political vacuum, mired in a cycle of mutually reinforcing social and economic vulnerabilities that emerged out of the rapidly changing structural forces in the southeast. The state failed to offer economic and political integrative measures for those distant,

the village guard system beginning in 1985 suggested that the Turkish army was much more interested in arming and keeping the Kurdish peasant communities in their villages than in displacing them. In line with the research done on Kurdish population displacement in the late Ottoman period and early Republican era, the state's behavior after the start of the armed conflict with the PKK was again interested in consolidating the state authority and power in the rural areas or recapturing it, but this time with different measures.

There were two main state strategies used to control the PKK mobilization in the southeastern Turkey; *resource allocation* and *coercion* (Bozarslan 2000, also see Ergil, 1995). The tactic of resource allocation involves the offer of economic and power assets by the state to the local Kurdish communities in exchange for their support in fighting against the PKK. This is how the paramilitary groups, village guards, were created. The state started to arm the Kurdish tribes and co-opted them in a new form of patronage relationship based on armed power. This strategy reproduced and militarized the traditional tribal struggles and enmities among the Kurds. Not surprisingly, those local networks of patronage would be incorporated into the broader illegal networks of neopatrimonialism during the 1990s and revealed partially by the Susurluk Scandal in 1996. In a parallel vein, Derluquian, (2005) for example uses the Weberian terminology "neopatrimonialism," (i.e. neopatrimonial "clans" and communities of patronage) to define the state sponsored "mafia-style" social groups involved in corruption and violence in Eastern European countries and Central Asia after the collapse of the Socialist Block.

Coercion, on the other hand, aimed simply at the elimination of all resistant elements in the region through destruction of the countryside and population displacement, including those communities who were unwilling to join the paramilitaries against the PKK. Indeed, PKK also used similar strategies to 'honor' and 'venerate' its supporters, promising them ranks, prestige, status and material rewards, while 'punishing' all 'traitors' violently. PKK employed guerilla strategies to extract support from the local communities and manipulated the traditional tribal enmities among the Turkish Kurds to secure spaces of maneuver in the region. While the PKK violence targeted state elements (such as Turkish civil servants and the state-friendly Kurdish communities) as well as infrastructure and public investment sites, the state inflicted violence not only on the armed guerilla, but also on the civilians allegedly providing logistic support for the illegal organization.

Polarization among the rural communities as pro-PKK vs. pro-state has introduced new enmities into the already fragmented and hostile relations among the rural Kurds. These enmities between the PKK and state-friendly Kurdish communities and between the PKK and the fundamentalist Kurdish Hezbollah, which would enter the scene of violence in 1990s, ended up displacing thousands of people during the 1990s. Displacement in a peculiar way turned into a means for the sides of the armed conflict to see "who is with us" and "who is not" as well as differentiating the geography in terms of who controls which part of the topography. Plantations and forests were burned down by the Turkish army in order to better control and monitor the conflict topography. Martial law in southeastern Turkey continued to be in force even after the withdrawal of the Turkish army from civilian politics in 1984. In 1986, the majority of the southeastern provinces were officially put under a state of emergency (OHAL) for about a decade until it was gradually lifted between 1999 and 2002.

Immediate recruitment for the PKK came from poor peasant communities. Especially poorly educated youngsters with no social and economic future prospects, education and/or employment

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marginalized Kurdish peasants (M.E. Bozarslan 1966[2002], Karaömerlioğlu 2000; also see Avcioglu 1969).

opportunities were willing to join the organization in search of better social status. These young people had also already been highly radicalized during the class-based bifurcated domestic political environment of the 1960s and 1970s, so that violence was not difficult for them to embrace (Bozarslan, 2004). The Kurdish peasant communities displaced in the 1990s were not necessarily PKK supporters, but mainly poor peasant communities with weak ties to both the Turkish state and those established Kurdish tribal entities who had established strong alliances with the central Turkish state. In that respect, displacement was widespread but still selective; and it was the composition of the political affiliations the local communities forged with the state (or lack thereof) that operated as the determining factor in whether displacement was directly by the Turkish army or indirectly by the chaos of the armed conflict - and who was to remain. Social and political standing of the peasant communities determined whether or not they would be inflicted with the PKK and displaced, while displacement itself turned into a process of socialization and politicization for the displaced in ethnicized terms dictated by the PKK influence.

Armed conflict and political violence have crystallized the traditional alienation between the local Kurdish communities and the central state. Newly emerging dynamics specific to 1980s and 1990s complicated the relationship between the local population and the Turkish state beyond traditional contention in the region. Particularly, the PKK factor in the region has had effects on the way local people make sense of their position vis a vis the Turkish state and Turkish society in general. As people have developed ideological and familial relations with the PKK, state-citizen antagonism has sharpened and gained an accentuated ethno-nationalist tone, reflecting the PKK discourse. Indeed, the PKK has successfully capitalized on local people's social, economic and political vulnerabilities, using ethno-nationalist sentiments. Ethno-nationalist sentiments have been reinforced by a quest for justice among the local population socio-economically marginalized before displacement and further victimized during the course of the armed conflict.

...We were ignorant peasants by then. We were enlightened by the organization [the PKK] and learnt about our rights.

(D. Gökalp, personal interview, summer 2004)

It has been through these dialectical processes of questioning the legitimacy of the Turkish state (the perpetrator of the violence in the eyes of the Kurds) and of becoming a part of the PKK and Kurdish politics through personal or family affiliations that displaced Kurds have developed discursive relations between the violence they experienced and their being target due to their being Kurds, first "would be Turks" then "so-called" citizens of the Turkish Republic (Yeğen 2006).

Politicization of Kurdish identity has been, however, an exercise in exclusive claims to the privileged status of the victim. Being Kurdish has been associated with all the suffering, human rights violations, killings, disappearances and displacement. The ones who stayed back home and collaborated with the Turkish state and the security forces have been attributed a lesser 'Kurdish identity' not only by the victims of displacement and state violence, but also by the organized Kurdish groups, activists and pro-Kurdish/pro-PKK civil society. There has emerged an internal enmity between '*yurtsever*' Kurds who support pro-Kurdish politics and sympathize with the PKK, and the Kurds who refuse to challenge mainstream Turkish politics and distance themselves from pro-Kurdish politics and the PKK. Kurds considered state friendly include a wide range of people such as Kurdish politicians, businessmen and Kurdish intellectuals who tend to take on a more moderate, critical and at times pragmatic stance in relation to politics, as well as rural tribal communities and village guards who agreed to collaborate with the Turkish security forces against the PKK. They have been labeled as the scourge of the imagined 'Kurdish nation',

threatening the ‘Kurdish struggle’ to which it is assumed that they are tied via their *blood*, ‘betrayers’ who collaborated with the ‘enemy’, the ‘animals’ who failed to reason about what was right and what was wrong, and the ‘immoral’ who exchanged their souls and the cause of the Kurdish struggle for money, power and arms. Kurdish communities that remained in the rural areas have kept their distance from the process of grassroots politicization associated with the organized Kurdish groups in the city centers. Rural communities, such as village guards fighting against the PKK, were trapped in between their tribal leaders and the Turkish security forces. They have remained mute, marginalized by the pro-Kurdish community and ignored by the international human rights organizations, if not identified as perpetrators of violence in collaboration with the Turkish state.

The gray zones of state power demonstrated distinct challenges to the Turkish state during the course of the armed conflict. On the one hand, the de-ruralized poor peasant communities with their historical alienation to the state have turned into “the” major constituency of the PKK and the grassroots basis of its legal partners in Turkish party politics. On the other hand, the state and the nature of its relationship to the local bourgeois or commercial/business classes, religious establishments and the power elite in the region came to constitute the other side of the Kurdish question with a peculiar twist that those local power actors have been co-opted by the state within the state, and became the extensions of precarious state authority in the region (this co-optation trajectory could be traced further back in the Turkish history). Following the 1980s, the militarized state reaction to the PKK insurgency transformed the previous clientelist networks into the more complicated network of unofficial power, which, through the dynamic of corrupt and illegal forms of nepotism, privileged the landowners, commercial bourgeois and old tribal chiefs, adding to them a new stratum of “warlords” with their village guard constituency.<sup>4</sup>

## **Routine Politics in Everyday Life in Southeastern Turkey**

### *Social Economy of Routine Politics*

Upon the arrest of the leader of the PKK in 1999, the lifting of the regional emergency rule concomitantly with the democratization reforms undertaken by the central government created temporary hopes for depolarization and the ending of the conflict. The pro-Islamist government, the fervent supporter of neo-liberal policies and the IMF, adopted a new direction toward a distorted form of the “universal social rights” approach since 2002. As part of this, the central government has initiated policies to address issues with poverty and “street children” (e.g. Buğra & Keyder, 2003, 2006). It was in this environment that the central government reevaluated the displacement issue as one of “social risk”, amenable to reduction through social policy, socio-economic development and reconstruction in southeast Turkey (Aker, Çelik, Kurban, Ünalın & Yüksek, 2006). In the manner of aiming a therapy at a symptom instead of the illness, the general aim appears to make the local population more able to deal with the problems of structural poverty and unemployment and to mitigate the social, economic, and domestic burden carried by the poor. No concrete policy initiative has been undertaken at the social policy level to specifically address poverty and unemployment nor the specific problems associated with the forced nature of recent migrations.

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<sup>4</sup> According to a 2006 source, there are currently more than 70,000 Kurds working for the Turkish state as ‘village guards’ in their original rural places of residence. This number is further evidence of the tragic fact that, together with their family members, there are hundreds of thousands of Kurds in the southeast organized around gun-power. (TESEV 2006)

Indeed, my research among the migrant communities in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir has convinced me that identity-based politicization and local antagonism toward the Turkish state is mainly an outgrowth of a politics of survival. Conflict-affected migrant groups in cities have developed a politics of survival to make sense of their experiences with violence and to imagine (future) life chances. Socio-economic stability entails political security; and in turn, political security guarantees socio-economic well-being, if not today, definitely tomorrow, when the “rights of the Kurds are recognized,” as perceived and stated by the majority of my informants. The politics of survival serves as a heuristic for the many conflict-affected Kurds who are tentatively positioning themselves within the structural changes that have overwhelmed them. Sometimes they assert themselves as victims, sometimes as citizens, but most often as committed supporters of a discursively existent “Kurdish cause” and its fighters in the ongoing “Kurdish struggle.”

I do not mean to reduce socio-economic insecurities and political insecurities into each other, since they do not necessarily overlap. However, my research suggests that during the course of the war, different insecurities have mutually reinforced each other in southeastern Turkey and across Turkey, which in turn contributed to the radicalization of the Kurdish identity and the increasing popularity of the PKK in the region among the local people and grassroots initiatives. Political violence together with the social, economic, and political transformation in southeastern Turkey during the course of the armed conflict have deeply affected the lives of the Kurdish masses, who tend to articulate their experiences in terms of their Kurdish identity and perceive the violence of the pro-Kurdish actors as legitimate, moral, and just, acts of appropriate retribution. In the same vein, Kurds in urban poverty tend to perceive socio-economic problems such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment as identity-related problems expressed in term that “we have been made to suffer, because we are Kurds,” “Turkish state doesn’t want Kurds to eat, to have jobs, or to be wealthy,” “if my children are hungry today, it is because that the Turkish state wants Kurdish kids to be weak and ill.” This local *ethnicized* rhetoric of the politics of unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty is also promoted by the organized Kurdish groups such as the pro-Kurdish local municipalities and has further antagonized the conflict-affected Kurdish citizens of Turkey against the central state. Political insecurities politicize economic insecurities in ethnic terms.

### *1999: A Turning Point*

After the ceasefire declared by the PKK in 1999, hostilities largely ceased until June 2004 when clashes resumed between the Turkish army and the PKK. With the cessation of the armed conflict in 1999, it seemed that there was legitimate hope for depolarization in politics and reconciliation between the central government and pro-Kurdish actors. The pro-Kurdish political party (HADEP/DEHAP) came to the municipal government in several strategic southeastern provinces in 1999 and again in 2004, while EU sponsored democratization reforms, which turned out to be cosmetic, encouraged various groups of Turks and Kurds to be hopeful about the future. This was the brief heyday of legal Kurdish politics and Kurdish civil organizing in southeastern Turkey, when Kurdish actors began to establish themselves as active and now democratically elected representatives of the Kurdish masses in the region. The pro-Kurdish party’s taking over municipal control indeed produced hopes within the liberal circles in Turkey that the new era would facilitate articulation, negotiation and depolarization, setting the basis for social and political reconciliation. In line with this optimism, Gambetti (2005:53) noted that “[t]he municipality became the engine force that opened new spaces of communication and expression, which not only fostered cultural life, but also allowed for new political publics to emerge.” In a

similar vein, Öktem in his 2005 study on Mardin argued that urban spaces would emerge 'as the site of negotiation' with the end of the armed conflict.

While the large part of the territorial struggle of Kurdish insurgents was fought in the countryside, it is the urban space that emerges as the site of negotiation during the depolarization of politics, in the realm of symbols as well as in the everyday practice of its residents. (Öktem, 2005)

The post-1999 period might have had the potential of peacefully transforming the Kurdish movement and accommodating its demands under the newly emerging power configurations that also involved international actors such as UN and European Union. It was indeed interesting that there was still substantial army surveillance in southeastern Turkey together with a peculiar political immunity, discursively granted by the European Union's leverage over Turkish politics, which operated through the imposition of democratization reforms and policies of zero-tolerance to human rights violations. The geography of southeastern Turkey as a region and its urban spaces presented "opportunities and constraints" (using Tilly's words 2003) for organization and claim-making. The nature of political immunity enjoyed in the region was conducive to demand-making and making the previously marginalized voices be heard; and even the poorest migrants living in precarious periphery neighborhoods in Diyarbakir and Van had the sense that this political space was immune to state intervention. American journalist Stephen Kinzer stated after his visit to southeastern Turkey in 2005:

These talks [Turkey's EU negotiation] could last for a decade or more, and the final outcome is far from guaranteed. Some European leaders, including Angela Merkel, the new German chancellor, and the French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, oppose Turkish membership. A host of issues, from terrorism in Europe to the status of Cyprus, could erupt to block Turkey. Yet in the Kurdish region, people are behaving as if they are already under Europe's protection. (Kinzer, 2005)

On the other hand, my impression of the situation in the region until 2004 suggested that the local population was quite concerned and anxious, waiting for 1) a reconciliation of the pro-Kurdish demands that were predominately defined during the course of the events in 1990s, including the formal ending of the conflict and the granting of amnesty for the return of the thousands of PKK guerillas back home from the mountains; and 2) a systematic solution for the basic problems of the impoverished urban masses, including unemployment. Not surprisingly, things did not turn out to be that promising with cycles of protest and violence erupted beginning in 2004. The much trusted democratic reforms pushed by the EU would hardly bring any concrete democratic openings to the country, whilst the optimism was in sharp contradiction with the upsurge in ethno-nationalism (Kurdish as well as Turkish), and the upsurge in religiously construed violence as well. As argued by Faraç (2005), the Kurdish Hezbollah, which was virtually suppressed at the end of the 1990s, had never been eradicated, and this organization would resume operations soon after 2004.

### *2004: A New Rupture*

Until 2004, the PKK-induced political unease in Turkey declined, but with the renewal of conflict in 2004, it was evident that the situation was more complicated than envisaged. The DEHAP/DTP assumed the role to function as a mediator between the ongoing Kurdish movement and its grassroots constituency to facilitate a better integration of the grassroots into the Kurdish politics, thus supposedly adhering to the civil society model of organizing their local constituency on the ground. On the other hand, the pro-Kurdish actors tried to communicate and improve their

relations with the central government, hoping to find spaces to push for the Kurdish demands. That was quite a risky and challenging endeavor that would fail to deal with the conflicting and competing agendas underlying the position of the central government and those underlying the strategy of the PKK and its representative in the local governments, and it led to further complications after 2007 elections.

In the meantime, since 2004, the faith of the Kurdish actors in the EU has gradually evaporated as well. The capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 had allowed the PKK to turn to managing the EU's perceptions in order to redefine itself, from being an outmoded guerilla movement with no international legitimacy to becoming a civil and political organization, ideally under the leadership of the imprisoned Öcalan. However, the EU, especially after 9/11 began to condemn PKK terrorism more frequently and express resentment over continued ties between legal Kurdish politics and the PKK. The pro-PKK organizations (including the Democratic Society Party, DEHAP/DTP) adopted the moniker, "Democratic Republic," which was coined by the PKK leader Öcalan and recently redefined as "Democratic Federation." Despite efforts to recoup the sympathy of the EU, it would not take long for the Kurdish actors to realize that the EU was pragmatically using the "Kurdish card" as a bargaining tool against Turkish membership to the EU and was not necessarily concerned with the true Kurdish demands<sup>5</sup>.

PKK declared an end to the ceasefire and restarted its attacks against the Turkish security points when I was in the field in Diyarbakır in June 2004. This was just several months before the EU decision over whether or not to start negotiations with Turkey for full membership. The organization had made a strategic decision to put pressure on the Turkish state as well as the EU in order to initiate a process for political reconciliation with the PKK. PKK also started to conduct hit and run attacks against Turkish security stations in several southeastern city centers, several of which happened during my stay in Diyarbakır. There were declarations of the PKK cadres being published in pro-PKK media, regarding the change in their guerilla war strategies, which announced that they were planning to move to urban centers and metropolitan areas in Western Turkey. Although, the organization targeted civilians in city centers, including the tourist locales in coastal Turkey, many times during 1990s, since 2004, urban centers became the premiere target referenced by the high-ranked PKK leaders, who saw them as new places for future activism. All this time, I was collecting disturbing data from my informants in Diyarbakır. A piece written down in my field notes as following is a good sample of the public mood at this time:

### *Contentious Politics of Youth*

"Erdal was content for the opportunity to tell me about the 'live-shield' initiative that he has been involved in since the start of the fighting between the PKK and the Turkish army... "We want a general amnesty for the PKK guerilla and want the Turkish army to end its operations against the PKK immediately. We are not scared to face the Turkish soldiers. We want to show that we are ready to sacrifice our bodies for peace... Our protests are for peace, but we keep getting detained then released... Nowadays, Turkey goes through interesting times due to the EU negotiations... Turkey's EU membership would not change a lot for us. We want what we want! Turkey in the EU or not, we don't care... If peace cannot be established, if our rights are disregarded, we may

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<sup>5</sup> In a 2005 international conference on "The EU, Turkey and the Kurds", pro-Kurdish groups organized in Europe stated their resentment over "the EU's failure to address the situation of the Kurds in any kind of substantive or coherent manner," noting "the highly negative potential implications of this scenario for the Kurds, other citizens of Turkey and the EU." EU-Turkey Civic Commission. The EU, Turkey and the Kurds. Second International Conference. Brussels. (European Parliament, 2005)

use violence. *But this time [Kurdish youth] won't go to the mountains [to join the guerilla]; [they] will enter into the hearts of the Turkish cities [Bu kez dağa çıkan olmayacak; Türk şehirlerinin kalbine girilecek--Emphasis added]...* PKK is losing power and getting dissolved by groups detached from the organization after Apo's imprisonment. Now there are independent militant groups that are and will be more violent than the PKK in the countryside and in the cities. PKK may want to pause the fighting, but those groups will not listen to anybody."

(D. Gökalp, personal interview, winter Diyarbakır 2004)

In a parallel vein, the pro-PKK civil society organizations had started to talk about new domains and spaces of activism [*yeni mücadele alanları*]. In a local civil society assembly in Diyarbakır on October 2004, one representative from a pro-PKK civil society organization (a pseudonym used) acknowledged the difficulties of carrying out the "guerilla struggle" any further under the current regional and international conjecture and called for a united pro-Kurdish civil activism that would replace the armed "struggle". The substance of proposed civil activism was not clear:

Armed conflict has not been a solution, we see that armed struggle should be carried into the civil domain, as Öcalan calls it, the 3<sup>rd</sup> domain

(D. Gökalp Fieldnotes, 16/10/2004, Kurdish Institute, Diyarbakır)<sup>6</sup>.

As top-down changes in the movement had not yet communicated evenly to the grassroots, both organized Kurdish actors and their local constituency seemed confused about how to redefine the movement and its demands according to the changing domestic and international conjecture. At such a moment in 2004, I met Fırat in Diyarbakır and recorded the following notes during my interview with him.

### *Contention within Contention*

"Özgür took us to Fırat's house, a very crowded two-floor house joyfully celebrating the release of Fırat from prison after 7 years. He was almost a minor when he was arrested for being a member of a terrorist organization... He looked very perplexed with tens of people around visiting the household to see him... When I was introduced to him as a Turkish researcher and doctoral student interested in his story, he flashed a big smile thanking me. His Turkish was amazingly eloquent and he was using some jargon to make it clear that he knew what he was talking about. "...we left Batman in the year 1993... My brother was murdered by a Hezbollah militant. After this, my entire family came here... Then I got arrested. I had been in prison for seven years for PKK membership... The prisons are like PKK universities<sup>7</sup>, we are all together in there. We read, learn and discuss about politics all the time... Today, we want new developments that can bring democratic openings in this country. We want our Kurdish identity to be protected under constitutional rights. We demand this for all the other people living under the roof of Turkey too. We believe that democracy will resolve all our problems in terms of cultural rights, but also political rights, women's and children's rights.... We now consider ourselves as one of the national constituencies under the roof of the Turkish Republic. It is not easy to explain this to my 60 year-old father. He still talks about an independent Kurdish state. He is not able to understand the changed conjecture; he is still stuck with the possibility of an impossible Kurdistan for Kurds in Turkey... One thing for sure that we don't want to be a toy of American Imperialism in the region, so why don't we try to live together within Turkey! Fırat's father was listening to our

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<sup>6</sup> A brief headline about this pro-Kurdish 'civil society assembly' appeared in *Ülkede Özgür Gündem*, 17/10/2004.

<sup>7</sup> Prisons as spaces of political education

conversation in Turkish very carefully, looking at my notes curiously. He became more and more anxious and finally interrupted the interview at that point talking in Kurdish yelling at Fırat. “If we won’t have our independent *Kurdistan*, then what the [...] did you spend your 7 years in jail for and made your mother cry every single day during those years? Did she suffer for nothing?...” Fırat looked at me. “You see, this is what I mean! If you were not here, he would spit in my face...”

(D. Gökalp, personal interview and notes, winter 2004 Diyarbakır)

It would not be easy to erase the impact of years-long violence in the region from the political memory of the local population. Fırat’s account reveals the differential impact of the troubled transformation in the Kurdish movement on different ranks of the PKK organization and on the sympathizers and followers of the organization. His interview points out the gap between the Kurdish movement as an elite project pragmatically altering its discourse in face of changing domestic and international context and the pro-Kurdish politicization at the grassroots level which seems as though it is starting to exert a growing influence on the organized Kurdish actors. Since then, Kurdish actors in both legal and illegal domains have used two contradictory strategies in their media, which now includes the internet. On the one hand, they replaced the discourse of independence (an independent Kurdish state) with rhetoric of “Democratic Republic” (recently redefined as “Democratic Federation Project” and circulated in the Parliament as a document last October) in Turkey, referring to “Turkish-Kurdish solidarity under the roof of Turkey” and “peace for the guerilla, peace for the soldiers.” On the other hand, they have subtly encouraged new forms of organization and activism with discursive references to new forms of repertoires, ranging from violent urban attacks in “Turkish cities” to peaceful urban protest activities to be organized by pro-Kurdish civil society to attract international attention.

On March 21 2005, two Kurdish children of migrant families from Southeastern provinces, Diyarbakır and Mardin set fire to a Turkish flag during the Newroz celebrations in Mersin. The event provoked an enormous reaction from the Turkish army as well as Turkish nationalist groups, who perceived it as an outrage to the premises of the unified Turkish nation. In a statement by the military, Kurdish citizens who were involved in what now was called a terrorist provocation were called Turkey’s ‘so-called citizens’. The Military declaration did not solely refer to the two children involved in the event, but rather targeted a specific group of citizens who did not have a legitimate status in the eyes of the Turkish army. The same controversial term was also adopted by a state university in Ankara, which denounced the flag burning incident in similar terms. The furious army statement received considerable public reaction, forcing the army to moderate its statement. However, the existence of the first statement points to the central problem of “legitimacy” between conflict-affected migrant groups in city centers and certain elements of the Turkish state. The two decade long armed conflict and its socio-political consequences embodied in the processes of violence experienced directly or indirectly by millions of civilian Kurds in southeastern Turkey had changed the parameters of the articulation between the state and Kurdish masses, who were once poor and/or landless peasant communities until the 1980s, and are now de-ruralized in *gecekondu*s and *varoş* while remaining poor, eking out their existence as a precarious and uprooted underclass.

The current forms of sporadic Kurdish juvenile violence have a complex history—though not that long that it could be traced back to the past two decades-- that I brought into attention at the beginning with two vignettes. Neither ethnicity nor poverty and unemployment by themselves would cause people to rebel against the state violently. It is not necessarily ‘ethnicity’ itself that is in play here, but rather the ethnic politicization under the pro-Kurdish political agenda; nor are these riots the result of displacement as a physical relocation in itself, but rather the displacement process conceived as a form of political violence inflicted on the displaced. Similarly, it is not

poverty and unemployment but rather the ethnic politicization (or ethnicization) of poverty and the feeling of injustice associated with poverty; not only a motivation to use violence on the side of the young juvenile rebels but also the existence of counter-violence in the form of police and Turkish security forces. Specific social, economic and political factors at multiple scales (local, national, regional and international) come together and reinforce each other in instigating violence among civilian Kurds.

And, there is more to consider. During the 2006 urban rampages in the region, reactions of pro-Kurdish municipality mayors were interesting. Especially that of the mayor of Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir, who resisted denouncing the street violence; on the contrary, as I have mentioned above, he expressed his sympathy for the guerillas killed and the protest participants in several occasions during the rampage. In a national TV channel, Baydemir was shown kissing a masked rioter on the cheek and saying 'I congratulate you because of your courage.'<sup>8</sup> The pro-Kurdish media, including the extensive broadcasting of the Denmark-based pro-PKK television channel (Roj TV), which also emphasized the 'courage' of the young protestors. This would not be the last urban rampage dominated by Kurdish children who grew up in extraordinary war circumstances. Considering that Kurdish actors operating within the domain of legality extract their 'democratic legitimacy' from their Kurdish electorate, predominately the Kurdish masses living in impoverishing city centers in the southeast as well as in the west, it is reasonable to expect that they would show some sympathy with their constituency and even extend support for violent juvenile acts of protest. Refusing to condemn civilian violence can be legitimized by Baydemir and his party in the Parliament on the grounds that the goal is to communicate messages to the army or central government and to make the disregarded visible in the eyes of the Turkish and international public. Their actions are still in line with the latest PKK strategy to carry the *mücadele* into the cities and to turn the anxiety and discontent among the local Kurdish population into protest actions, preferably with assertive repertoires employing some violence.

Since 2004 and including the latest cycle of protests last October (2008), urban rampages have not happened randomly. They happened at strategic moments of time with international connotations when the PKK, DTP and their local constituency were not able to articulate certain demands and expectations to the corresponding power actors within the boundaries of legitimate political space. It is also noteworthy that the AKP government has adopted a more and more authoritarian stance towards growing societal contention since 2004 and became particularly hostile towards the Kurdish politics following the local resentment and political humiliation prime minister Erdoğan experienced during his Diyarbakir visit in 2005. The party made further amendments in the anti-terror law in June 2006 that curtailed civil rights to serious extent. Publishing statements given or delivered by illegal organizations is now a criminal act under the rules spelled out by the new amendments, thus dealing a serious blow to civil liberties and the freedom of the press. Amendments regarding the rights of suspects under arrest particularly disturbed pro-PKK activists, who already suffer from the regime of security surveillance with the real and increasing possibility of torture in detention. In 2006, a number of events heightened the possibility of urban unrest: the fading hopes for a general amnesty for PKK guerilla together with already lost international leverage after 9/11; and the loss of faith in the EU or the Islamist JDP as forces of change in the state attitude towards the Kurdish demands. In 2008: the increased intensity of military operations in Northern Iraq together with the government attempts to Islamize and co-opt the Kurdish contention in the region, threatening the PKK with the loss of its constituency provided the social and political context that favored the outbreak of pro-PKK urban outbursts once again.

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<sup>8</sup> (see Turkish Daily News, 31/03/2006)

## Concluding Remarks

So what does this analysis tell us about the recent face of the Kurdish question in Turkey? Did the neo-liberal era launched by an externally supported military intervention in 1980 create a new Kurdish question in Turkey? I think that it constituted a new rupture in the Kurdish contention, which emerged when the complete withdrawal of the civilian authority – in essence, provoking a crisis of legitimacy - was coupled with an imposition of military regime under the crippling impact of neo-liberal politics on the state, economy and society. The PKK turned to an ethno-nationalist agenda under these propitious international circumstances, and the counter-terrorism activities of the army ironically created the grounds for the organization to politicize the grass roots in ethno-nationalist terms. The new Kurdish question resurfaced and articulated itself through three major entangled traits: (1) an ethno-nationalist claim that has gained credibility among a large proportion of Kurdish civilians, reinforced by acts of organized as well as privatized and arbitrary violence, resourced by using places and networks stretching beyond the international borders of Turkey; (2) the mutual suspicion and antagonism between the state and (some) Kurdish citizens as well as between the Kurds and the “other” Kurds in the form of deepening social and ideological fragmentation as the legitimacy of the state has been subverted; and (3) the emergence of a forcefully de-ruralized population and impoverishment aggravated by the deteriorating welfare system.

As the neo-liberal army intervention wiped out the last possibility of a possible social democratic mobilization in the country in 1980 and created the foundation of the new depoliticized party politics around ethnic, nationalist and Islamist discourses, the weakened state apparatus failed in its role as a social, economic, legal and political guarantor for the large segments of the national constituency, especially the disadvantaged Kurds in southeastern Turkey. When armed conflict in southeastern Turkey spread political violence across civilian Kurdish communities in rural areas as well as urban centers in the region, it introduced new dynamics into state/center-citizen/periphery relations, through which the state redefined the ‘legitimate’ Kurdish citizens and secure spaces/geographies, in contrast to the ‘illegitimate,’ ‘so-called,’ ‘undeserving’ and/or ‘suspicious’ ones. New enmities were also introduced into already hostile tribal relations in the rural areas as some tribes joined the paramilitaries (village guards), while other peasant communities were forcefully displaced.

I would like to go back to my introduction and reiterate my main point. A particular form of state-society alienation and antagonism emerged out of the agonies of the low intensity war in southeastern Turkey such that the state’s *legitimacy*, and therefore *authority*, was damaged on a mass scale in the eyes of the conflict-affected uprooted Kurdish masses. The latter, in turn, found themselves defined as the “so-called” citizens and “pawn of terrorism” by the authorities of their own state. As social, political and economic vulnerabilities accumulated and fed off each other during and after the 1990s, reservations and hostility towards “the state” remained. Ferguson (2003: 29) explains this in following terms:

Still, where lived experience, current conditions and relentless propaganda lead people at the grass roots to conclude that old authorities will not protect them, and that others who have victimized them in the past may be doing it again soon, there will be a strong tendency to fall back into local networks- of kinship, clientage, neighborhood, faction, sect, etc.- and get ready to fight (Ferguson 2003:29).

Indeed in absence of a meaningful state and/or political authority, Kurds who have suffered from state violence have taken their positions on the side of the Kurdish politics around the PKK. “The others” have sided with their tribal leaders under the village guard system in the countryside, or with local Hezbollah networks in the city centers. At best, they have recently been co-opted by the services provided by the Gülen movement and turned into “decent Muslim.”

The young Kurds, the children who grew up under the circumstances of the low intensity war in southeastern Turkey, who make themselves visible in urban rampages and protests, continue to be “irrelevant”, if not “illegitimate” or “so-called”, to the state. They were “irrelevant” economically and politically at the moment that their families were targeted by the state violence in the 1990s. The ones displaced were assumed to be potential economic migrants anyway, as well as potential terrorists. They were disregarded by the state and party politics during the 1990s, since they were considered to be politically “irrelevant”, even as citizens. They have become “relevant” as a consequence of international pressure and when they were perceived as a potential electorate in the battle between the JDP and DTP over local governments; but they fell back into the category of “social risk,” the “so-called” citizens or the “pawns of terrorism” when their economic and political “irrelevancy” was perceived as a threat to the national interests. But we still have more to look at to understand how “irrelevancy” turns into protest actions, “terrorist” (or anarchist) actions and contentious politics as opposed to demobilization. The foregoing discussion suggested that existence of social, economic and political insecurities together with the history of arbitrary state violence fed off the recent violent urban rampages at strategic times under the direction of the organized Kurdish actors.

Marginalized, disregarded and self-destructive Kurdish politics operating within the domain of legality have not helped to reestablish the trust relations between the state and the disturbed Kurdish masses. Rather they have pragmatically capitalized on distrust and manipulated the antagonism towards the state to consolidate themselves as “the” legitimate authority in the eyes of the conflict-affected Kurdish groups. Kurdish politics, as it has organized around the PKK ideology has successfully capitalized on the territorial and political vacuum left by the state’s failure to operate as a social, political, economic and legal guarantor of its national constituency. However, Kurdish politics has become self-entrapped inside a rhetoric of identity, language and culture, lacking a holistic understanding of the complex social politics and political economy of the region for which they claim to be the genuine representatives. Ethno-nationalist Kurdish politics around the PKK managed to entrench itself among the marginalized, alienated and forcefully de-ruralized Kurds; but failed to go beyond “militant particularism.” “Militant particularism” is maybe the most structural handicap of the identity-based social movements since the decline of the class-based mobilization.

Miller (2004) eloquently explains the importance of a social movement’s ability to communicate its collective identity across various scales building local, national and transnational alliances. In a parallel vein, Tilly (2003) sees collective identity as a continuum with embedded and detached identities representing the polar ends. While, embedded identities refer to a wide range of routine social interactions (i.e. gender-based, linguistic or kin-based); they are meaningful in small-scales (i.e. village or neighborhood) and difficult to mobilize beyond that scale. Detached identities on the other hand are more all-encompassing (i.e. citizen, worker, student, environmentalist or socialist) and easier to mobilize across scales. In this respect, according to Tilly (2003: 224), a collective action is successful when it manages to take locally embedded identities and ‘makes the basis for new larger scale, detached identities’. Miller (2004: 224) further argues, ‘[t]raditional geographies of mobilization, rooted in localized places and the nation-state, appear to be in relative decline’ and ‘... oppositional groups have failed to transcend these confines of ‘militant particularism’ or ‘particular localism’. It is actually quite interesting, in this respect, to juxtapose

the recent student protests in Greece that received extensive international attention and the Kurdish Juvenile urban rampages since 2004 that could not manage to attract the same level of interest or empathy neither domestically nor internationally.

Perhaps the next fundamental problem with “identity” politics, according to Fraser (2003), is that it carries the risk of depoliticizing and obscuring structural problems. Fraser (2003: 91-92) defines this as “the problem of reification”, entrenched in identity-based politics: “They [recognition struggles] tend, rather, to encourage separatism and group enclaves, chauvinism and intolerance, patriarchalism, and authoritarianism. I shall call this *the problem of reification*.” I contend that organized Kurdish politics around the PKK since its inception of a militant ethnic strategy in the 1980s has not managed to overcome neither “militant particularism”, characteristic of traditional guerilla movements, nor the problem of reification of “identity” politics. Limited self-criticism within the movement has never managed to institutionalize and communicate a different perspective cognizant of the social politics and political economy behind the ‘low intensity war’ and the general destitution of the Kurdish masses in Turkey.

The foregoing analysis has also aimed at making a broader argument by drawing attention to the new manifestations of Kurdish contentious politics: The nature of articulation between the state and society has radically changed since the 1980s. Neo-liberal restructuring did not only initiate economic liberalization, market financialization and privatization of public resources; but also started to redefine the state merely in terms of party politics and disassociate the politics from society to prevent the reoccurrence of “dysfunctional politicization” of the pre-1980 era (Kalaycioğlu 1991). Civil society has systematically been made irrelevant and pushed outside of the politics. Societal depoliticization and demobilization have been inevitable; but ironically prepared grounds for repoliticization in terms of identities transforming societal contention into polarizations between “Kurds” and “Turks”, “Laics” and “Islamists” or “laics” and “decent Muslims.” Societal detectors that are supposed to identify the structural causes of economic problems or political instability, organize and mobilize accordingly became disoriented. Social reactions became social reflexes against “separatist threats” and “Islamist takeover,” with no substantive power to change the status quos of the post-1980s as if it was not the 1980 military junta contributing to the creation of a “separatist threat” in the southeast and favoring Islamist organization as a bulwark against “dysfunctional politicization.” Indeed, the Turkish case has successfully proved the observations of some of the scholars of social movements; the underprivileged and marginalized masses in Turkey—Kurdish or Turkish—are rendered quite powerless, if not self-destructive in futile militant (re)actions, under neo-liberal ascendancy.

The foregoing discussion points to the necessity to examine the new phase and face of the Kurdish question with reference to the social, political and economic processes of Neoliberalism. I conclude with a call for imagining, on the theoretical level, a democracy promoting transformation grounded socially and institutionally (i.e. *social democracy*) through negotiation between societal groups, classes, civil societies and a prudent state strong enough to stand as a social, political, economic and legal guarantor of its national constituency and willing enough to settle accounts with its recent past. It is also a call for future research analytical enough to address the specificities of the changing nature of the state-society relations in Turkey and the political economy behind this change.

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