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Neoliberalism in Turkey: A Balance Sheet of Three Decades

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Abstract

This short study is designed to explore the three crucial elements of construction boom that Turkey has experienced since 2002, when the islamist/conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to the power. I claim that the construction boom and its impacts in general appear to be outcome of the certain composition of following elements. First element is the regarded relation between GDP and the construction industry with its supposedly strong linkages with other industries such as transportation, manufacturing etc. The second element is the waxing involvement of subsequent AKP governments. Since AKP swept the victory in Turkey's parliamentary elections with an overwhelming majority, the governments' direct involvement into the construction industry has been drastically expanded. Concerning the increasing government activities in the construction industry, a public agency, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) deserves special attention. The administration, which had been initially established to carry out social housing projects in the year 1984, became a significant actor in the construction industry. Last but not least, clientelistic networks between AKP and certain bourgeois fraction have been conducive to rapid construction wave. The clientelistic networks as such favor certain capital groups that are ideologically close to islamist/conservative politics. However, discussing these three elements does not mean that some structural elements are neglected while evaluating the boom. In contrast, it is argued that financially dependent accumulation pattern of Turkey, and increasing role of finance in the construction industry along with the tendencies towards restructuring/recommodifying of urban areas at global level has constituted the suitable structural circumstances for the boom.

Keywords

AKP, Construction Boom, Bourgeoisie

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Introduction¹

The construction boom in Turkey has been widely believed to play pivotal role in determining economic parameters. It has been regarded one of the important pillars of high GDP growth rates especially in the post-2001 economic crisis. More strikingly, it began to play a more prominent role in politics: E.g., showy presentations for the megaprojects (e.g. Channel Istanbul) started to come up before the recent elections; a shopping mall project on Gezi Park, destruction of the very last remained green area near Taksim square in Istanbul, triggered a country-wide protest not only against the environmental devastation of the project itself but also the government policies in general. In short, it began more and more central to political economy of Turkey.

In order to understand the central position of construction industry for the recent developments in Turkey, I assume, five inter-related elements should be taken into consideration. First, the extent of construction boom that we have witnessed in Turkey almost more than 10 years should be noticed. Second, the role of islamist²/conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) –who took the power in the year 2002, sweeping the victory in Turkey’s parliamentary elections – in stimulating such boom should be explored. Subsequently, the attention should be confined to the class aspect of the construction boom with special focus on Turkish bourgeoisie (and its fractions). Such a focus enables us to throw some light on clientelistic relations in the aforementioned industry. Fourth, the tendencies in the world highly constraining policy options also should be taken into the account. However the tendencies exclusively promoting neoliberal reconstructing of space and financialization of real estate have been several times, comprehensively discussed elsewhere (e.g. AAlbers, 2008; Brenner and Theodore, 2005; Jessop, 2005). Hence, I do not cover this aspect in this concise paper. Last but not least, financialization of Turkey’s economy, and the extent and direction of financial flows that condition as well as facilitate constructions flourishing should be also mentioned. However, I do not cover it too, since I would take for granted what radical economist literature on Turkey (e.g., Onaran, 2006; Yeldan, 2006a, 2006b) has already pointed out – which have elaborately presented Turkey’s growth model highly dependent on the continuity of the financial inflows.

Construction boom

A positive relationship between the growth rate of the construction industry and of GDP in the developing countries has been broadly acknowledged – and even verified several times by the related literature (Balaban, 2012, p. 26; Giang & Sui Pheng, 2011). The construction industry in Turkey has been likewise regarded as a crucial element of growth not only through its significant share in the GDP but also its strong linkages with other industries such as transportation, manufacturing – especially in the field of cement and ceramics –, mining etc³.

¹ Throughout the text I do not use specific letters in Turkish alphabet (e.g. ç, ş, ı, ğ). For instance, Erdoğan, Özdemir and İzmir are the Turkish names for Erdogan, Ozdemir, and Izmir, respectively.

² I use the term islamist (or interchangeably islamic) to define those political figures, political and economic groups, parties, their supporters and other types of organizations, who articulate, construe as well as re-construct religious values within Islam and its vocabulary as a means of politics. It does not refer to a homogenous group, party etc, but pertain to a specific political inclination. For a comparison and more comprehensive discussion on the concept see Adas (2003, p. 25).

³In order to discern the extent of the construction industry at the macro level, the labor statistics might also be considered as an important indicator. According to official data, in the year 2011 the number of employees in the construction sector exceeded 1.5 million level – which is more than 6% of total employment (Turkish Statistical Institute (2012, p.169). But arguably it is even more than that considering the fact that multi-layer

The data set presented in the table below can be interpreted as an indicator of a co-movement of GDP and the construction industry, which does not constitute less than 5% of GDP. What is also of interest to me is that this data is often regarded as an indication of an ongoing construction boom only shortly interrupted by the recent global crisis.

Table 1: Some macroeconomic indicators (1000TL*)

Years	The Volume of Construction Industry	GDP (Purchaser's Price)	Annual GDP Growth Rate	Annual Growth Rate of Construction Industry	The Share of Construction Industry in GDP (%)
2002	3903516	72519831	6.2	13.9	5.4
2003	4207040	76338193	5.3	7.8	5.5
2004	4801693	83485591	9.4	14.1	5.8
2005	5250284	90499731	8.4	9.3	5.8
2006	6220955	96738320	6.9	18.5	6.4
2007	6573647	101254625	4.7	5.7	6.5
2008	6040811	101921730	0.7	-8.1	5.9
2009	5067196	97003114	-4.8	-16.1	5.2
2010	5996258	105885644	9.2	18.3	5.7
2011	6688257	115174724	8.8	11.5	5.8
2012	6725099	117674715	2.2	0.6	5.7

Source: Derived from Turkstat Database

* At 1998 basic prices

The role of AKP governments in the construction industry

Subsequent AKP governments have been decisive in the industry in the last decade; for this reason more emphasis should be placed on this topic. Above all, several laws have been either passed or amended during the AKP governments to promote construction activity in general. The majority of these legal arrangements can be evaluated as an attempt to curtail the regulations on urban planning framework and development controls, which are almost merely regarded as 'bureaucratic red tape' (Balaban, 2012).

More strikingly, since AKP took the power, the governments' direct involvement into the construction industry has been drastically expanded. Concerning the increasing government activities in the construction industry, a public agency, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) deserves special attention. The administration, which had been initially established to carry out social housing projects in the year 1984, became a significant actor in the construction industry. TOKI's share in housing provision, which had been only 0.6% between 1984 and 2002, rapidly rose to 24.7% in the year 2004 (Dulgeroğlu Yuksel & Pulat Gokmen, 2009, p. 2). Since AKP came to the power, TOKI has built more than 500,000 residential units, costing more than 35 billion US dollar.

subcontracting activities and thus informal and precarious employment relationships are widespread in the construction industry (Yun 2010). Official data does not cover the substantial part of people employed in the construction industry through informal linkages.

Since then, some arrangements have been designed to empower TOKI in the sake of more efficient government involvement. All estate (as well as authority) that had belonged to the General Directorate of Land Office⁴ was conveyed to the TOKI in the year 2004. TOKI thus became the sole authority over 64.5 million m² of public lands⁵. These public assets could be either utilized for construction activities or sold by TOKI without receiving the approval of any other relevant authorities (Cavusoglu, 2011, p. 47).

Two important amendments made TOKI a significant player in the financial system. Firstly, in the year 2002 the leading real investment trust, Emlak GYO A.S., which had also been a government agency, became one of the subsidiaries of TOKI. Such an acquisition has increased TOKI's "financial power" (Dulgeroğlu Yuksel & Pulat Gokmen, 2009, p. 2) in a way that it has been able to channel some of financial capital to the construction industry and vice versa. Secondly, in the framework of the mortgage law enacted in the year 2007, TOKI has been authorized for some financial operations, including issuing internal and external bonds and any kind of securities in return for TOKI's pledged receivables.

Both the structure and the institutional positioning of TOKI have been profoundly changed under the AKP rule. TOKI, which had been affiliated with the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, got attached to the Prime Ministry in the year 2004. By an amendment in the Public Management and Control Law (5018) in the end of the year 2005, this public agency became exempt from the auditing mechanism conducted by the Turkish Court of Accounts.

TOKI has not been part of the general budget, thus it has not been affected by any kind of austerity policy as it has been the case for most other public agencies. Apart from the revenues derived from the sales and rental of the constructed units, TOKI has generated revenue from the production of housing units by the private sector on TOKI owned lands (revenue share model), the sale of land owned by the treasury and interest revenues. Its contribution to the general budget is even indirectly limited because this agency has been exempted from any official fees, municipal charges and taxes.⁶

Such privileges for TOKI have been justified in the framework of its official aim – to construct social houses for low-income groups. However, as some studies published underline, TOKI has made few investments at all in the least developed regions of Turkey (no investment as of the year 2009) and more interestingly most of the houses produced by TOKI are designed for the middle and upper classes; not for the lower classes to whom TOKI is (officially) supposed to supply houses (Cavusoglu, 2011, p. 48; Ozdemir, 2011, p. 1111)

What makes this the issue of AKP governments' involvement more intriguing is that the direct government involvement in the housing market through TOKI appears to be contradictory to the overall emergent tendency which rather encourages a private market orientation in social housing policies and contributes "dismantling of housing welfare systems" (Rolnik, 2013, p. 1060). However, TOKI should be regarded as a significant component in Turkey's welfare structure. In contrast to several counterparts, for instance, in Europe (Guerra, 2008), it plays a predominant role in the direct provision of housing in

⁴The Directorate was established in 1969 to be the responsible entity for granting construction permits, adjust land prices and provide land for investments in industry, tourism etc.

⁵ Law No. 5273

⁶ According to a newsletter published by the Chamber of City Planners, these exemptions created unfair completion in the market; the companies hardly compete with TOKI projects (Sehir Plancilari Odasi 2008, p. 48).

addition to its other duties, including granting credits to the private sector in order to promote social housing and/or related projects. As elaborated by Doherty (2004) for the case of EU members, the role of the state in the construction industry does not lose its importance. Yet, as in the case of Germany and France, the states have “long been more of an enabler than a provider” (Doherty, 2004, p. 256). As the author discusses, even though the neoliberal policies have dismantled some institutional settings, the state remains a key player, however, in regulating the housing market. Nonetheless, the substantial withdrawal of the direct state involvement in the housing provision is evident not only across Europe. As elaborately indicated in Rolnik (2013), the withdrawal in most countries symbolizes “the transfer of responsibility for housing provision to the market”, however the forms and strategies of the transfer have been geographically varying significantly (Rolnik, 2013, p. 1061). TOKI in this context appears to be a quite inventive case. Through benefiting from extensive networks of contractors and subcontractors, the administration has been incorporating market forces, i.e. construction firms, real estate agencies etc., to its housing production.

The Turkey’s history of urban development and the stance of islamist politics thereto seems to be key, understanding the extensive and direct involvement of AKP governments into the construction, particularly, housing industry. Along with the industrialization in the post-war period, from the 1950s onwards, Turkey has witnessed internal migration and concomitantly drastic demographic change which has led to an urgent need for housing. As many observers indicate, *gecekondu* (informal housing, the dwellings without any permission from the relevant state authorities, landed overnight in literal translation) emerged as one of the first responses to the rapid pace of urbanization (Dulgeroğlu Yuksel & Pulat Gokmen, 2009; Ozdemir, 2011, pp. 1101–1102). The governments in that period seem to connive at ‘illegal’ housing in the sake of shrinking necessary labor time – in order to support industrialization process through maintaining a low wage level. By 1980, there have been almost one million informal dwellings – which is more than 20% of total dwellings erected between 1955-1980 – clustering around big cities (Öncü, 1988, p. 47). The “mushrooming” of illegal housing was almost never discussed in the framework of the “violation of property right” in the official discourse. Moreover, any attempt by the relevant authorities to destroy them was “regarded as an act of cruelty” (Bugra, 1998, p. 307).

There were few narratives that problematized the existence of illegal housing and the issue of unrestrained urban sprawl in the pre-1980 period. Among them, the discourse, used by the socialist movements, which aimed to empower living condition of *gecekondu* areas have been repressed or suppressed in the official discourse. However, the islamists, who have mostly carried out their political activities in the squatter settlements along with socialist movements, started to discuss the issue of *gecekondu* and urban development in the framework of a ‘problem’ to be solved. Islamists have proposed to reconstruct these sites through aggressive state intervention. This proposal fitted to their discourse, which venerates the idea of rapid developmentalism and provokes their growing impatience for industrialism (Bora, 1999, p. 56).

This idea has been also reinforced by the certain dominant interpretation of Islam which attaches importance to a house ownership. Since the family is construed as a holly entity by this interpretation, as one of the leading islamist intellectual discusses, a house designed to shelter a family has to be seen more than a commodity (Bulac, 2009). According to the islamists, housing provision has been regarded as a urgent matter and therefore by no means can be left to the market mechanism itself. Such a proposal was discussed seriously in the political and economical crisis of the late 1970. However, it will be discursively (as well as institutionally) reproduced in the post-1980 period.

The image of *gecekondu* has been re-shaped especially since 1990s when the neoliberal policies became more dominant. These sites have been regarded as a problem in the fabric of the cities in a way that they have been quoted as the unique source of drug dealing, terror, anarchy, unearned income and so forth. However, in the pre-1980 period they had been rather perceived as the naïve, ill-starred sites which are unfortunate outcome of industrialization and concomitant migration. Those living in *gecekondu* were suddenly declared as squatter or unauthorized occupant. As one observer incisively puts it, “[t]he change of atmosphere in question is clearly observed in the media where the traditionally sympathetic coverage of the problems of ‘poor’ squatters has given way to the (sometimes well-founded) presentation of the same people as quite well-off individuals who enjoy middle-class standards of living at the expense of regular citizens who pay their taxes and live in regular buildings” (Bugra, 1998, p. 314).

Since it came to the power, islamist politics has adopted similar discourse stigmatizing *gecekondu* areas (Kaya, 2013). Even the prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, used the term “tumor” while describing the sprawl of *gecekondu* sites (Kaya, 2013, p. 42). However, just before winning local election and thus becoming mayor of Istanbul in the middle of 1990s, he had been the one who profoundly defends the shantytowns against the insult that label all their residents as “thugs pillaging land” and had pointed out rather the structural origins of the problem (Bora, 1999, p. 52).

Ironically, direct involvement of central governments into the housing sector overlapped with the neoliberalization process of the 1980s⁷. TOKI was established in 1984 in order to initiate housing provisions to solve social housing problem. Nonetheless, under AKP rule its influence became much more pronounced as a direct house provider. According to the TOKI Production Report, the number of residential units constructed (by middle of September 2012) is more than half a million⁸ –which is, in the words of current TOKI's president, "equivalent of 22 new cities with 100,000 population each" ("TOKİ 560 bin konut inşa etti," 2012, November 21). From the year 1984, when TOKI was founded, until AKP came to the power, the number of produced residential units had been less than one-tenth (43.145). In addition to this, the number of non-residential units (mosques, hospitals, etc...) constructed by TOKI and its increasing authorization for as well as direct participation in the gentrification of squatter housing areas under AKP rule enhance the observation that it becomes a giant public enterprise. Today, it appears to be more than a public agency which merely seeks to solve the social housing problem (Sonmez, 2011a, 2011b).

What has been constructed in the big cities, also through TOKI, is a sort of crummy imitation⁹ of high rising apartment blocks mostly constructed in Europe in the post-war period. Reading

⁷ It is ironic because, the neoliberal discourse in the 1980s in Turkey instigated a narrative in which the state intervention to the economic sphere started to be associated with scarcity. In the framework of this hegemonic discourse, economy and state started to be evaluated as externally related entities. The history of Turkish underdevelopment started to be rewritten: The reason of the economic crises was state's arbitrary interventions to the economy. Because the state has hitherto kept the bourgeoisie under tutelage, Turkey could not catch-up the developed states. Therefore according to the narrative, to further development, the market should be left alone.

⁸ Numbers are derived from TOKİ's own official website, <http://www.toki.gov.tr/faaliyetözeti> (Last access, 18.09.2012).

⁹ The residential units produced by TOKI has been so often criticized in terms of their poor quality and carbon copy ugly structure by those who purchased these houses as well as by the relevant actors of construction industry. These critiques peaked when 5 people were dead in the recently built TOKI residential units as flood hit in northern Turkey ("INTES'ten TOKİ'ye tek tip eleştirisi," 2012; "Samsun'da sel felaketi: 9 ölü," 2012, July 4)

some islamist intellectuals text would lead to a conclusion that the construction style, which tries to change the structure of cities in a ‘modern’ way, is contradictory with islamist politics. Indeed, some prominent islamist intellectuals have been criticizing the blocks have been constructed at expense of grave deterioration of environment as well as disintegration of the close neighborhood relations and demise of so-called neighborhood culture. Such blocks actually have been destroying the ‘values’ in the neighborhoods, according to these intellectuals, on which Islam placed emphases (Adlı, 2012; Alkan, 2012a, Alkan, 2012b; Bulac, 2009; Savgı, 2012). Moreover, the way how is being constructed is not the way how prominent conservative/islamist architectures and urban planners have devised and is what they have been principally argued against (Bora, 2011). Contrary, it is the way of those who ascribe erecting apartment blocks to ‘contemporary civilization’ and treat them a *sine qua non* for modernization (Bora, 2011).

Nonetheless, AKP's keen involvement into the housing sector that makes such blocks flourish is compatible with its political tradition. In contrast to the some islamist/conservative intellectuals position, AKP and its subsequent ancestors have never been seriously questioned the idea of modernism which has been the hegemonic paradigm throughout the Republican period; nor have its constituencies been (Bora, 1999). The purpose of rapid reconstruction of the cities in the sake of creating more modern places have been so often pronounced by the leading figures of islamist politics, including Tayyip Erdogan.

The Turkish Bourgeoisie

In the neoliberal era, Turkey has witnessed a rise of a new economic entrepreneurship, which is widely known as Anatolian capital. (Demir, et al., 2004: 167). The term ‘Anatolian’ refers to spatial fixes, including cities such as Konya, Kayseri and Denizli which are identified “as the traditional strongholds of Islamist politics in Turkey” (Onis, 2009:26). This new form of capital is also named ‘Green Money’, ‘Islamic Capital’ and ‘Anatolian Tigers’ (Demir, et al., 2004: 168, Beris, 2008:38). Respectively, the first two terms refer to the ideological identity of this bourgeoisie fraction. The third term, the Anatolian Tiger, is mostly used when the companies within this form of economic entrepreneurship introduce themselves (à la East Asian Tigers). A significant segment of these companies, which constitute this new form of economic entrepreneurship, is directly and indirectly connected with some Islamic brotherhood organizations (*sects*) and other similar religious networks. Especially, the Independent Businessmen and Industrialists Association (MÜSİAD), which was established as the ‘business arm’ of Islamist politics in Turkey in 1990, plays a crucial role to build the network between different enterprises in different cities (Onis, 2001:19). The AKP’s further electoral successes since it came to office – namely, local elections in 2004 and in 2009, and the parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011 – and the debate on the rise of the Anatolian bourgeoisie have gone hand in hand. Anatolian bourgeoisie supported the AKP to win the elections through both supportive discourse and financial aids (Beris, 2008:42). Anatolian bourgeoisie has found lucrative environment in the post-1980 period thanks to financial ‘liberty’ and lax regulation thereof. Construction industry has been one of this fraction’s prominent fields of activity; i.e., Anatolian bourgeoisie has grown to mammoth proportions in the construction industry from its inception.

The construction boom that has been witnessed ten years has been indeed stimulating capital accumulation of those bourgeois factions who have engaged in this industry. The substantial segment of the bourgeoisie engaging in the construction industry could actually be labeled as ‘Anatolian’ (e.g, Ihlas, Calik, Killer Kombasan, groups), since they have been quite influential in the islamist party, and has been directly and indirectly connected with religious networks (cf. Cavusoglu, 2011:45). Moreover, as Sonmez (2011b) underlines, the

composition of companies awarded with contracts by TOKI or other public agencies related to the construction industry has changed in favor of these companies. Clientelistic networks between AKP and Anatolian bourgeoisie appears to have been conducive to rapid construction wave despite irregularity claims¹⁰.

However, apart from this "islamic bourgeoisie", other factions of the Turkish bourgeoisie have perceived the construction boom as beneficial for their interests because of the expected backward and forward linkages of the construction industry with other industries. Especially through credit, mortgages linkages, construction industry should be also seen one of the important pillars that induce financialization. Such linkages have been providing remunerative business especially for the large conglomerates engaged in finance sector.

Concluding remarks

The construction boom and its impacts appear to be outcome of certain composition of different political/economic factors. Before all else, accumulation pattern of Turkey, highly relying on financial inflows, and increasing role of finance in the construction industry along with restructuring/recommodifying of urban areas at global level has formed prerequisite conditions for the boom. AKP governments' desire to make the construction industry flourish, however, has more than one reason. First, the construction sector has been regarded as one of the driving forces of growth rate of GDP level. Second, islamist/conservative politics has growing impatience for the reconstruction of cities, which in return has been conducive to extensive and direct government intervention. Such impatience has been reinforced by certain dominant interpretation of Islam, which attaches importance to house ownership, as well as by the modernist ideas inherent to islamist/conservative politics. Last but not least, the Anatolian bourgeoisie that has remarkably operated in the construction industry has tight ties with the AKP governments. Those ties result in loose regulative constraints (e.g., building code) on the industry and more favorable contracts for those capital groups linked to this bourgeois fraction. However, one cannot translate these linkages into the conclusion that AKP governments have privileged the Anatolian bourgeoisie vis-à-vis large conglomerates. Turkish bourgeoisie as whole seems to be satisfied because of the backward and forward linkages of the construction industry.

The construction boom has been carried out at expense of not only expelling inhabitants of some certain commodified neighborhoods but also environmental deterioration especially in big cities. Nevertheless, it is quite central to sustain the AKP's hegemony. The presentation of ostentatious projects or handover ceremony of TOKI houses has been designed for electioneering or propaganda of islamist/conservative politics. However, the history sheds light on the fact that hegemony has been always contested. An occupy style protest against the demolition of a relatively small park under the guise of urban renewal sparks a series of demonstrations all over the Turkey in June 2013. The crackdown of police on the protestors in Gezi Park triggered the biggest anti-government protest in the neoliberal era in Turkey. Thus, construction industry does not only matter to the government or Turkish bourgeoisie any

¹⁰ The close relation between the Islamist Party and the Anatolian bourgeoisie has been always subject to irregularity claims. Since AKP's party ancestor, Welfare Party (RP) won the major seats in the two metropolitan areas of Ankara and Istanbul and came to power in other local administrations, sect followers and the party's constituency has been employed in ordinary as well as key positions of municipal governmental bureaucracy (cf. Hosgor, 2011: 351). As noted in Demir et al. (2004), "this transfer of power not only brought differentiation in services provided, but also changed the composition of local companies awarded with contracts to provide local services" (Demir, et al., 2004: 171).

more. But also it started to matter to the dissent powers and has become quite central to opposition.

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