The Non-Recovery of the Left in Turkey

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the left as a political force has been in a global retreat from its previous position of political relevance. This trend has been more pronounced for some, and less for others. In the Global South, this decline came in the backdrop of the fall of the Soviet Union as a global political force, but domestically delivered at the hands of repressive military regimes. Following the defeat, some countries have now begun to see the resurgence of left-wing politics at the ballots, while the agendas and ambitions of the parties representing the left tradition have varied greatly. However, for some, the onset of neoliberalism following the military regimes have meant the virtual disappearance of the left from the political scene altogether, of which Turkish politics is an example. Even though as an agent of social mobilization, leftists and socialists were a force to be contended with throughout various military regimes from 1960s onward, following the defeat delivered by the 1980 coup d’etat, leftist parties and mobilizations have become stories of a distant past. In this paper, I look at why, despite the fact that the left in Turkey was able to achieve considerable success for some decades before the 1980 coup, it has not been able to reach similar levels of success or mobilization since then.

In domestic political discussions, two arguments dominate the discussion: one, that the crushing effect of the coup was so severe that the organizational and political infrastructure could not be built back up. Important numbers of the militant cadres and workers were either killed in
conflicts or in the military’s torture chambers. Those who survived the torture and prisons were morally and physically defeated, and those who managed to escape prison were now too scared to have any political connection to a left-wing movement, hence the non-recovery. However, many other left-wing movements faced similar - if not more severe - levels of repression, in Greece, Argentina, Chile… the list can go on, but they reemerged, at the very least electorally, in more moderate variants. In neighboring Greece, even though the anti-communist junta stayed in power for seven years, the Greek Communist Party still amasses a stable 5% of the vote and the left-wing coalition SYRIZA won major electoral victories in the last elections. So, the fact of the coup, while it could account for the sudden decline, cannot explain the subsequent non-emergence of left-wing politics. The reasons for that would need to be organizational, social, political, or economic. The second common argument in Turkey is that the Turkish society has what’s been called a “right-wing vote” tendency, that it is culturally distant from left-wing ideals or mobilization (Toros 2012). The proponents of this view cite the fact that ever since the transition to multi-party democracy the share of votes for right wing parties has been significantly greater than the total vote share of various left parties. Furthermore, the influence of Islam and the fact that the majority of the country is Muslim are thought to be the source of fundamental antagonism towards the ‘atheist’ socialists and leftists. While this sentiment has been used in campaigns and propaganda by the various center right, liberal, nationalist, or Islamist parties, it falls short of explaining the actual trajectory of events, in Turkey or elsewhere in the region. First of all, there seems to be no real basis to assume that the religious beliefs held and practiced by a devout Muslim should inhibit his political thinking in a fundamentally different way than a devout Russian Orthodox or a Latin Catholic Christian, when all belief systems are arguably equally distant and hostile towards non-believers. Global political history
has demonstrated that the countries where the latter religions constitute the majority do tend to produce quite vibrant and successful left wing movements. Secondly, if the cause of the issue is Islam, the emergence or sustenance of leftist movements and socialist politics should have been equally non-existent across Muslim-majority countries, which again we know does not reflect the actual history. In fact, in the Turkish context, religious conservatism was actively promoted as a response to the left’s ascendance by anti-communist governments preceding the coup and then by the military regime itself, famously culminating in what the then Prime Minister Turgut Ozal called “the Turco-Islamic synthesis.” The Islamification of the working classes was seen as the surest way to distance them from the “atheist communists.” Right wing governments and the military leaders of the period saw Islam as a “safe” recourse in the fight against the spread of radical leftist ideas and organization among the masses.\(^1\) Hence, the cultural and religious traditions of the country were propped up, to the extent that the military regime introduced mandatory religion classes in K-12 education in the new constitution in 1982.

Despite the high levels of social mobilization and union strength that leftist movements were able to achieve in Turkey, the only plausible part of the argument is on the point of the electoral success of the right. After the transition to multi-party democracy, the right has always been the first party in the elections, and has mostly been able to form governments, whereas the total share of left-wing votes have never exceeded 30-35%, with the exception of 41% for the then social democratic CHP in 1977. However, even then the social democratic left could only form an ineffective minority government, which gave way to various bargains with the parties of the right. Despite the various other factors that could have contributed to the right’s electoral success, or detracted from the left’s, it is important to underscore here that electoral success has never been a central concern for left-wing groups until well into the 1990s, at which
point its political and organizational power was perhaps at its lowest. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, radical left groups have not paid much attention to electoral strategies, aside from brief alliances around particular elections. In fact, legalism vs. armed struggle has been one of the central lines of division for the socialist left. Thus, the lack of electoral success for the left should be evaluated cautiously when trying to understand the general tendencies of the Turkish electorate.

In what follows, I will first present an overview of the development of leftist and socialist political movements in Turkey, focusing mostly on the period between 1960-1980 that is relevant for this analysis. The emergence and the establishment of the first legal socialist party and the first independent union confederation mark the important milestones in the left’s political development in the 1960s, to be followed by a period of mushrooming of organizations and factions in the 1970s, debating the appropriate means of working class struggle. Finally, I will describe the events in the lead-up to the military coup in 1980 and its immediate aftermath. I argue here that even though the left was politically forceful and its influence widespread, organizationally it was not at a level of preparedness or unity that would have allowed it to withstand the impact of the coup. Because it was weak and dispersed organizationally, it was crushed to the extent that it was and as fast as it was. However, the critical reason for its inability to reemerge or reconstitute itself as a political force in the past 35 or so years was due to a shift the Turkish economy experienced in the immediate aftermath of the coup, from a very hasty and quick transition from an ISI regime to a neoliberal economic model. By the time that the old political cadres, militants, and workers were out of prison and ready to re-organize, the economic terrain on which they were supposed to continue fighting had shifted dramatically.
Before moving on to the historical account, what I take as the indicator’s of the left’s successful organization and strength needs to be clarified. There are possible measures one could take here: union presence, electoral success, popular organization and social movement presence, or influence over other established parties and national agenda. Even at the height of its organization, the Turkish left never yielded any electoral successes, except for a couple of instances of more limited campaigns, as discussed above. Similarly, the left’s influence and relevance for national policy has always remained very limited throughout the period, which was mainly marked by coalition governments of the center- to far right (referred to as the “Nationalist Front” in Turkey). The most relevant aspects of the left’s strength are union presence and social movement presence for the purposes of this analysis, which will be discussed at length below.

The History and Development of Socialist Politics and Mobilization in Turkey

To render any comparison between the two periods possible, what needs to be established first and foremost is the fact that the left was successfully organized, politically present and capable in the period before the coups. For these purposes, I will present an overview of what the state of left organizing was, its political formations, both in legal and illegal forms, electoral successes where applicable, and its involvement and sway over labor movements. While labor organization is critical to any leftist formation, as workers constituted the backbone of the left’s theory and base, leftist politics should not be thought of as being limited to the labor movement. What defines and distinguishes the left is not necessarily the centrality of class and economics in its organization and demands, but rather what it identifies as the cause of the society’s ills, and hence its prescription to them, that is, its outlook on capitalism, the state, and the relationship
between the two. Therefore, wherever possible, leftists have organized not only in labor unions and workplaces, but amongst human rights campaigns, in movements for racial and gender equality, for housing, education, against wars and imperialism, and so on. In the Turkish context especially, the left’s involvement in anti-fascist struggles throughout the 1970s and its relationship with the human rights campaigns and position on the Kurdish question were the main struggles around which it organized from the 1990s onwards. This definition and understanding is also important for the period between 1960-80, as most of the organizational differences and debates sprang out precisely from the question of who to organize: the workers, students at universities fighting against the fascists, the slums or the peasants. Based on their decision of who to prioritize groups splintered, eventually started accusing each other of being counter-revolutionaries, agent provocateurs, or aiding the growth of the fascists, and drew their guns at each other. In the lead up to the coup, the in-fighting among the left had escalated so much that various left groups were killing almost as many of each other’s militants as the nationalists were targeting them. This factor in particular, I will argue, contributed to the left’s organizational inability to sustain the blow dealt by the coup in 1980.

*From the first Communist Party to Guerrilla Warfare*

The introduction of socialism and communism to the Turkish political landscape was through first the formations of small revolutionary parties in the Black Sea and Balkan regions of the Ottoman Empire. After the Empire’s fall, the modern Turkish state inherited these radicals, mainly as immigrant workers from Thessaloniki and surroundings. However, while the new regime was revolutionary in many of its social and political goals, it had no intention of following the Bolshevik example up north. Leftist activists were rounded up in series of “mass
communist arrests” from 1927 onwards, only 4 years after the foundation of the new republic. The single-party regime of the new republic targeted two main groups: socialists and Islamists. Following the transition to a multi-party democracy in 1950, the Islamists found a place for themselves in the ranks of the newly founded right-wing Democratic Party, and the new government continued its repression of leftists with new rounds of mass arrests from 1951 onwards (Tuncay 2009; Ersan 2013). According to Ersan, these government policies sealed the fate of the original Turkish Communist Party’s capacity for mass organization until 1970s (p. 18).² With most of its theoreticians in exile or in prison, the Communist Party was confined to various radio programs and publications from abroad and did not command any popular power. It was only after the mushrooming of socialist organizations following the youth movements in the late 1960s that socialists became an important force.

The vitalization of socialist politics and leftist organizations came about in 1960, first with the formation of the Workers Party of Turkey (Turkiye Isci Partisi; hereafter TIP). The military coup that ousted the right-wing Democratic Party in 1960 drafted a new constitution, one that paradoxically provided extended rights for freedom of association, unionization, and student organizing. In fact, the 1961 Constitution was the first time when the right to unionize, right to collective bargaining and strikes were legally guaranteed. The military regime of 1960 also marked the official acceptance of ISI in Turkey and the industrial relations reforms were in keeping with the spirit of the first “Five-Year Plan” and what they called the “democratic economy,” where labor and capital peacefully coexisted (Algul 2015; 57-59). The Workers Party came into being out of this context, and was initially formed by a group of labor activists and socialist intellectuals for the purposes of parliamentary representation. In 1965, in the first elections it competed, the Workers Party achieved the greatest electoral success any socialist
party would in Turkey for the next decades. With 3% of the national vote, the WP won 15 seats in the parliament, out of a total of 450. The Workers Party’s success was concomitant with the growth of the labor movement, culminating in the establishment of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (Devrimci Isci Sendikalari Konfederasyonu, hereafter DISK) in 1967, over whose policies and decision-making bodies the party was very influential in its first five years. In fact, most accounts of DISK’s history accept that it was the labor activists and the socialists in TIP that led the way for the union. DISK’s official foundation was announced on February 12th, the same date as TIP (Ibid, 226). However, the accounts also note that the relationship between the unionists and the “intellectuals” were uneasy from the start, with the unionists being skeptical of the “intellectuals” and their “communism” (Ibid, 80).

However, this uneasy relationship does not capture the political significance the both organizations played in the development of left-wing politics and workers’ mobilizations in Turkey. The idea for DISK grew out of a 85-day strike at the state’s glass factory (The 1966 Pasabahce Strike) and the official union’s shortcomings and unrepresentativeness throughout this struggle. The then de facto official labor union, Turk-Is, was a bureaucratized and to a large extent co-opted union, though it claimed to represent about 500,000 workers (Ibid, 242). Established with 5 founding unions, and 12 other participating unions, DISK had roughly 67,000 members. Even before its first mass demonstration in 1970, DISK still took political positions on daily politics, on issues of NATO bases, to the killings of student activists. Its first real show of power took place on June 15-16, 1970 over a draft legislation requiring unions to represent a third of the workers in a sector to be recognized for bargaining. The ruling Justice Party proposed the “one third” cut-off based on a calculation of DISK’s and the official union’s, Turk-Is, membership. Neither the ruling party nor the DISK leaders had any misconceptions about this
(Algul 2015; 265-269). On June 15th, 70,000 workers went on strike, with another 70-80,000 joining them in work stoppages, marches and strikes on June 16th. The workers marched through the streets and established work councils in factories. On June 17th, martial law was proclaimed in Istanbul and the industrial city of Kocaeli. This show of force by DISK has mostly been named as the first critical trigger of the subsequent coup on March 12th, 1971, demonstrating to the ruling classes the power organized labor, and the socialists by extension, held, as TIP was virtually synonymous with DISK at that point.

The other important turning point for both bringing on the coup, as well as the subsequent development of the left, came out of an ideological dispute within TIP between those arguing for what was called the “national democratic revolution” and those claiming “scientific socialism,” meaning socialist revolution. The proponents of the “national democratic revolution” believed that the socialist transition would appear in two stages in Turkey, first through the military coup of an “amicable” junta and then a subsequent proletarian revolution. The practical implications of this split meant two immediate questions for the party: first, whether to organize among the younger and progressive elements of the military, and then by extension, whether to put off any plans or organization for a socialist revolution. The youth organization affiliated with the party, Dev-Genc (short for “Revolutionary Youth”), broke off from TIP as a result of this division, further splintered into two and took up arms for guerrilla warfare. As the next generation of revolutionaries also agreed, this was an ill-fated and premature endeavor, with both groups lacking support from popular classes for armed struggle. The two groups that splintered, THKO and THKP-C, took up arms in different regions, with THKP-C having ties among military students too, but both attempts were crushed within five months by the new military regime. The military rule announced in 1971 marked the end of the first period of vitalization of leftist and
socialist politics in Turkey, which would be in a hiatus until 1975. However, before concluding
the discussion of the 1960-70 period, it is important to note that the ill-planned guerrilla warfare
strategy was not just the result of voluntarism or youthful enthusiasm on the part of a group of
student activists. Rather it was also heavily conditioned by the increased use of violence by the
state on student and leftist groups, both through police and military crackdowns, or torture
chambers, as well as by the mobilization of paramilitary groups of nationalists and Islamists.

From One Coup to the Next: Mobilizations of 1975-1980

Following the coup in 1971, leftists politics entered a phase of hibernation. TIP couldn’t
solve the ideological crisis it was going through, and disbanded. Other legal leftist or communist
parties couldn’t come into being for a while. DISK was able to maintain its organizational unity
and infrastructure and was now free from TIP’s influence. This period is also referred to as the
“independent period” of DISK, before it was to come under the influence of the Communist
Party in the second half of the 1970s (Algul, 52). The short-lived rural guerrilla aspirations gave
way to a renewed wave of leftist mobilization. Still distant to electoral struggles, the groups
splintered even further, though, all commanded some level of organization and strength in
working class neighborhoods and slums. The Turkish Communist Party (Türkiye Komunist
Partisi, hereafter TKP), in particular, was the most dominant in the unions and confederations
and had effectively taken control of DISK. The key unions and the leadership positions within
the confederation were held by TKP militants, even though the party was still outlawed at this
point. Along with the successors of the previous TIP, TKP also adhered to the principles of
legalism, prioritized union work and tried to pull the Kemalist party, CHP, further to the left. The
other notable presence in working class communities was Dev-Yol (“Revolutionary Road”), a
successor of the now disbanded Dev-Genc. In this period, Dev-Yol successfully organized a 25-day strike in the Yeni Celtek coal mine in Amasya, an area that was previously deemed unorganizable because of employer crackdown. Following Dev-Yol’s involvement, the workers in the mine went on strike and eventually got the employer to agree to all their demands. Further, the workers’ committees that were set up during the strike took over the distribution of coal in the region, providing coal to the most needy for free out of total production. One of the other most notable achievements of Dev-Yol in this period was to take over the local municipality in a Black Sea municipality named Fatsa, where the organization set up local committees for the administration of the budget, infrastructure planning, set up a parallel, communal legal structure overseeing matters as diverse as inheritance to domestic violence. The Fatsa experience for many in Turkey was a test run of how a socialist republic could be run, so much so that amidst a religious and ethnic conflict in Corum, the then Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel said what was going on in Fatsa was more worrisome. Following Demirel’s remarks, the prelude to the next coup was initiated by a military operation to Fatsa, where the mayor and the political activists were imprisoned, some later killed in torture.

Amidst a mushrooming of leftist groups and socialist politics, a comprehensive study of the period finds ideologically and methodologically distinct 11 groups that were organized more or less nationally, with legal and armed illegal wings (Ersan 2013). Though almost all splintered from the earlier TIP and Dev-Genc, a few fault lines distinguished the organizations. The first was on the question of legalism, whether to pursue electoral success and organization or to take up arms. Especially given the fact that the state was arming the nationalist/fascist paramilitary groups, the question of armed struggle was a very real and immediate concern. Aside from TKP, groups that favored legalism became confined to small circles, precisely
because they could not provide a solution to the day to day violence that the nationalists were bringing to neighborhoods and workplaces. TKP was able to become a mass organization primarily through its control over DISK. The second divisive issue was on the question of the Soviet Communist Party versus the Chinese Communist Party, as it was the case in much of the world in this period. Finally, after the methods and ideology issue was settled, a further division came along on who and where to organize: the fascist violence and presence at the universities demand that groups prioritize organizing the students, as well as workers, but for hard-liner groups this was seen as a deviation from the Orthodox doctrine of organizing among the working class. As a result some groups ended up neglecting the universities and young militants altogether, while others paid the price by losing touch with working classes and working class neighborhoods. Incidentally, Dev-Yol was one of the only groups to explicitly target the youth and university students as its main organizational base, and it also turned out to be the one to organize the struggles that would have the most effect and that were most meaningfully rooted in working class communities.

One of the other critical turning points in the late 70s was the struggle over May Day celebrations. In 1976, unions led by DISK and affiliated political parties held a large rally celebrating May Day in Taksim Square, even though it was outlawed. The celebration in 1977 was even larger, but was the target of contra-guerilla’s covert attack and resulted in the deaths of at least 34 people, and injuring over a hundred. While the exact number of attendees to the protests are unclear, most accounts agree that it was around 500,000 people. In fact, just in 1977, DISK tasked 20,000 workers and union members with security, as it had banned three Maoist groups from participating, a number that one of the organizers later remarked surpassed the number of unionized workers in the 2000s. Following the massacre in Taksim Square, the
government prohibited May Day celebrations the following years, citing security concerns. However, DISK, TKP, and various other groups were committed to holding May Day rallies, to commemorate those who had died the year before. Ersan (2013) in his extensive study of the left groups of the 1970s notes that the turnout of May Day rallies in the years leading up to the coup were actually indicative of how much the left could hold out when faced with a coup. Under heavy government repression, the streets leading up to Taksim were blocked, regular citizens were spooked by threats of arrests, terror attacks, etc. The unions and political militants committed to going to Taksim square never exceeded a handful in the following years, always to be arrested within hours of reaching Taksim, and the left could never present a united front, agreeing on strategy or goals even around an issue as straightforward as May Day celebrations.

Though the extent of fractionalization and the enmity created by it greatly hampered the left’s political organization as a whole, in my opinion its ability to sustain the blow of the coup, at its height, class struggle and political organization were important and strong forces to be contended with. In the immediate aftermath of the coup in 1980, the president of the employers’ union, Halit Narin, famously noted, “thus far, the workers had the last laugh; now it is our turn” (Ozan 2012). Though Narin was delusional about the conditions under which workers lived and struggled, he captured the business sentiment quite succinctly. Based on a calculation by the Ministry of Labor, in the lead-up to the coup 15,682 workers were on strike in 1977, costing 1,397,000 workdays; 21,011 workers amounting to 1,148,000 workdays in 1979, and finally 84,832 workers making up 1,303,000 workdays lost to strikes in the first nine months of 1980 (Koc 2010). Confirming business’ sentiment, Boratav’s seminal study Turkish economic history estimates exploitation rates in the 1963-1980 period to be in secular decline until the mid-1976, when the trend reverses and reaches “levels unsustainable for the populist model,” in Boratav’s
words. According to his work, the share of wages in the industrial value added was over %31 in 1963-64, to fall below 25% in 1972. This trend reversed itself in 1973, to reach the levels of 1963-64 in 1976. Between 1977-79, the average share of wages was 37.3% (Boratav 1988, 114).

The coup of September 1980 came on the heels of a turbulent 12 years, that begun with the student movements of 1968. It was welcomed by significant portions of society, as the military justified its takeover by claiming to end the anarchy and chaos. The armed conflict in the cities between the right and left groups, as well as the infighting within the left killed about 20 people every day in political murders, by one estimate (Tachau and Heper 1983; 25). The Turkish military, in its two years in control both put an end to the escalating political fighting and pushed through an aggressive structural adjustment package, which had been deemed ‘impossible to push through without a dicta regime’ at its introduction in January 1980. Besides aggressive neoliberalization, the coup resulted in 650,000 arrests, of which 517 prisoners were sentenced to death, 50 executed, 171 died of torture under arrest, 10 299 died in prisons, about 14,00 were deprived of citizenship and another 30,000 sought political asylum abroad, all in a country of 43.9 million. 11 Furthermore, Ersan cites a police publication of “terrorist” organizations and the numbers of arrested militants from the same document, and finds 22 organizations. The security forces estimate that the most compromised groups had around 50% of their militants captured by 1983, three years after the coup (Appendix 1, pp. 427).

In the roughly 35 years that followed the coup, the left has virtually become a non-entity. Aside from a few instances of limited electoral success, which were only possible through alliances with Kurdish parties and candidates, strikes with mass participation or any frequency have been absent from political life. The only isolated instances large strikes were a general
strike of one day from public employees and the longer lasting strike of laid off workers from the privatization of the state’s alcohol and tobacco company in the past 30 years. In the next section, I try and identify what could have been the reasons for its seeming evaporation from political life.

**The Evolution of the Economic Structure**

Following the coup, the old cadres were most out of prison in 1985, to an environment of political lull. In an attempt to rebuild the movements and organizations, the old organizers held series of meetings and discussions that would span a decade. According to most of the political cadres, the main problem was one of organization, mainly in their choice of tactics and strategies. They mostly saw the fractionalization of the left as being one of their critical mistakes, and the decision of armed struggle wasn’t necessarily deemed an issue. However, there was (almost) unanimity about the irrelevance of armed tactics now, and discussions focused on establishing legal umbrella political parties. Some groups would succeed in this endeavor, but most wouldn’t, as the enmities of the past were hard to forget. Most of these groups at one point or another had equated the struggle against fascism with being almost synonyms against who they thought were “corrupting” the revolutionary struggle. Thus, the old fractionalization persisted behind a curtain, and eventually led to dissolution in most cases. Regardless, the important take away from this is that the newly emerging left groups never seriously engaged either with their past economic analysis and theory; nor with the current situation. This was not only limited to political circles. In academic work, too, analyses of the Turkish economy following liberalization have mostly focused on fiscal policy, inflation and financialization of the economy and households. The fate of the industrial working class has only attracted attention in discussions of the growth of the marginal and informal sector.
It was partly this observation that motivated the research for this paper. The possibility that the Turkish economy had changed in a fundamental way so as to preclude earlier methods of organizing from taking off the ground, having effectively eroded the class base that the left was trying to organize. In fact, it would also explain the relative success and persistence of some revolutionary groups in organizing in a limited number of neighborhoods in the slums (Ersan 2013; p. 12). As can be seen from the graph below, there is validity to this premise. The share of labor force employed in industry declines sharply the years following the coup. While the industrial workforce saw a sharp decline in immediate the aftermath of the coup d’etat, going from 35% in 1982 to 20% in 1985, it has been rising modestly ever since (Table 1).  

![Share of Employment in Sectors](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS)

The trend is even more dramatic in services, where the percent of total employment in the service sector goes is nearly cut in half, going from 60% to 30%. Almost all of this employment
went to agriculture, which is very counterintuitive from the perspective of Turkish political economy, as domestically all governments in this period were criticized for not protecting agriculture and hurting domestic food supplies. The dramatic rise in the share of agriculture was soon offset, however, the share of total employment agriculture still surpassed those of industry and services. One possible reason for this seemingly paradoxical trend could be the transition from ISI to a laissez faire economy. However, large public industrial production sites or companies were not privatized well into the 1990s, which was when most of their labor force were laid off. However, none of these explanations seem plausible enough to explain a ten fold increase in the share of agriculture in total employment, going from 5% to almost 50%. It is only after 2000, incidentally following perhaps the most severe economic crisis in Turkish history, that the share of employment in the various sectors settles into the trend that we would normally expect to find in a recently and severely liberalized economy. The dramatic shift between the industrial-service and agricultural sectors further confounds the question of why the left has not been able to achieve its pre-coup levels of strength and organization. By the end of the 1970s, most of the nationally organized groups were adherents of Maoism, had organizational structures and militant groups in the countryside. If anything, their entire analysis of the Turkish economy claimed that Turkey in 1970s was a semi-feudal, semi-colony. The post-liberalization, post-coup Turkey was significantly more rural and agriculture oriented than the one they had left before prisons.

Based on this observation, two further questions need to be investigated: one, how accurate or realistic was the earlier revolutionary wave’s understanding of the Turkish political economy as, the balance of class forces between the agrarian, industrial and service sectors. Second, what precisely led to this sudden overturn in the relative shares of the three sectors and
what it meant for organizing. In terms of the failure to organize among industrial labor, an alternative hypothesis could posit the possibility of production moving into cities and areas where the left and the unions were traditionally weak, i.e. under nationalist control in the lead up to the coup. That could account for the rise in the share of the industrial workforce without any growth of union or left political activity. However, to evaluate this question further, firm-level or district-level data is needed. Data for 1992 and 2002 is available from the official statistics for each city, with information on the breakdown of sector, number of firms in that sector, and the number of total people employed in each sector. However, this is not enough to answer the question at hand, which requires being able to see the trend at least after the coup. Another interesting finding is shown below in a breakdown of number of workers employed in manufacturing per sector. Confirming the findings above, regardless of the rate of growth there is a critical break at year 2001 for all sectors, when numbers of workers employed increases, dramatically for some, modestly for others. This can be presumed to be following the structural adjustment plans introduced following the economic crisis in 2000. Further research is needed to determine both the geographical distribution of this growth in manufacturing, also its share relative to population growth in that period (see Table 2 below).
Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to answer the question of, why despite a vibrant and successful period of organizing, the left in Turkey could never recover its pre-coup strength and organization. I believe part of the answer lies in its dismantling by the coup to such severe extents and pace. This was made possible by the organizational weakness and the level of fractionalization within the left. However, fractionalization by itself cannot account for it – if all the groups that splinter command hundreds of thousands of militants, that does not inhibit their capacity to survive against an oppressive regime. Rather, it was the fact that these groups were targeting one another just as often as harshly they were targeting the nationalists or Islamists. This divisions prevented any meaningful front to be struck before or during the coup years. For
its subsequent inability to re-emerge, however, I believe the reasons lie outside the organizational nature of the groups. The Turkish economy, and with it, its class structure, dynamics and the mode of class struggle underwent such dramatic and sudden changes in the years immediately following the coup, that by the time the old left was trying to reconstitute itself, the terrain of struggle was completely different. However, going into this research I expected this shift to occur as dramatic de-industrialization, an explosion in services and of the informal sector and a now virtually extinct agricultural sector. Instead, the data shows an explosion in agriculture for about a decade, coupled with high levels of growth in services, and a modest but steady increase in industry. Data from manufacturing sector also conforms to this trend, with all sectors increasing the numbers of workers under their umbrella (though this needs to be re-evaluated in relative terms), but very high growth for a handful of sectors.

Our common intuitive explanations of the shift out of ISI, privatization, liberalization cannot readily account for the trend we have seen and understanding its relationship to the formation (or lack thereof) of left wing politics requires a more firm-level, or city/region-level analysis, which was not possible for the paper at hand. Future research into this question would take up some of these issues.

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**Endnotes**

2. Throughout the left’s history in Turkey, the Communist Party and Workers Party in particular are referred to as “the original one” or the 1st WP, 2nd WP etc., because of continued disbanding and reforming. Over time, the cadres and ideological orientations of the new formations changed so much from the last that it is practically impossible to attribute the subsequent ones to the original ideological lineage.
3. With these results, the WP became the 5th party in the parliament, out of 6. The Justice Party (AP) won 240 of the seats with 52.9% of the vote, CHP won 134 seats with 28.7%. The various
small parties won 11-19 seats each, with 2.2% to 3.7% of the vote (TUIK, General Election Results, 1950-1977).

4. Algul (2015, p. 241-242) writes that DISK itself reported that it had 84,000 but that this number should be taken with a grain of salt. He estimates that the individual unions making up the confederation manipulated the magnitude of their own membership in order to have more delegates within the confederation.

5. The same legislation also foresaw a 4-day limit on strikes, but it took a secondary position in the demonstrations as the representation issue presented an existential crisis for DISK (Algul 2015; 267-8).


9. When looking at the fluctuations of days lost to strike from year to year, it is important to note that martial law preceded the onset of the coup in most industrial centers. Announced partially in 1979, it was evoked repeatedly to break up strikes.

10. It is important to note that these numbers are based in official records, thus they do not reflect the full picture. The official numbers are cases for which the state assumed responsibility. Therefore, we can reasonably expect that the actual death toll of the coup to be much higher. Furthermore, the number of arrests, while great in magnitude, should not be taken to be a reliable indicator of the degree of left’s organization. Many, who had no connection to neither politics nor left groups, were rounded up for no apparent reason other than misfortune.


Bibliography


