



Making and breaking alliances: on valuation in hegemonic projects

Katharina Bodirsky^{1,2}

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Abstract

In public discourse, the polarizations that accompany the success of authoritarian populisms in recent years are often portrayed as the result of “culture wars” rooted in incompatible values. This article approaches the relation between values and politics differently. It examines the role that state and capitalist modes of valuation play for the alliance-formation underpinning hegemonic projects. The argument is illustrated with the case of Turkey where processes of devaluation and dispossession were manifold in the past years. Polarization here expresses not so much unitary political identities of opposed values than a specific, polarizing dynamic of alliance-formation in authoritarian populism. The orchestration of state and capitalist modes of valuation on the one hand allows for the formation of alliances with both dominant and subordinate social groups and on the other hand also entails contradictions that might constitute a source of fragility for the continuity of the project.

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Lecturer in the research group ethnology and cultural anthropology of the department of history and sociology at the University of Konstanz, Germany.

Researcher in the Program Frontlines of Value: Class and Social Transformation in 21st Century Capitalism, University of Bergen, Norway.

✉ Katharina Bodirsky
katharina.bodirsky@uni-konstanz.de

¹ Department of History and Sociology, University of Konstanz, Universitätsstr. 10, 78464 Constance, Germany

² Frontlines Program, University of Bergen, Postboks 7802, N-5020 Bergen, Norway

In April 2017, the Turkish electorate was asked by the governing AK Party (AKP) to vote in a referendum on the introduction of a presidential system. Hailed by some as a means to a strong Turkey, the intended constitutional change was criticized by others as further entrenching authoritarianism. When the referendum was narrowly decided in favor of the change to a presidential system, a cartoon published in a Turkish satire magazine¹ expressed a profound sense of division. It showed a road sign of the sort usually marking the entrance of cities, which read:

Turkey
Population: 80.000.000
Us: 40.000.000
Them: 40.000.000

The sense of profound social division that the cartoon conveyed was widespread in Turkey and far from unique to it in the contemporary moment: it has accompanied more widely the recent success of illiberal populist regimes² around the world in what were considered firmly liberal, or liberalizing, democracies. Populism seems to feed polarization as “a powerful political dynamic that orders disparate social groups into two, seemingly coherent political blocs” (Samet 2013). The cartoon picked up on that. What it did not show was the far from monolithic character of the seemingly coherent poles of political identity. There was in fact no common political ground on which the opposition in Turkey could meet apart from a rejection of the AKP, while the pole associated with the government comprised shifting alliances over time.

In public discourse, the polarization that seems to become visible in the electoral success of right-wing populisms is often portrayed as a sort of “culture war” that is rooted in incompatible values of distinct social groups (e.g., Koch 2017a for critique). This article approaches the relation between values and politics differently. Rather than examining diverging conceptions of “the good and desirable” (Graeber 2001) in politics, it focuses on the struggles for hegemony that are played out through capitalist and state modes of valuation, with their concordant forms of valorization, devaluation and dispossession, inequalities, injuries, and resentments.

The term valuation here refers, I refer in a general sense to attributions of (differential and intrinsic) worth to persons, objects, or practices that obscure even as they are implicated in the social relations that produce value. It thus encompasses movements of valorization, of devaluation, or the complete deprivation of value through practices of dispossession. The term valuation – rather than value(s) – expresses the dynamic character of a process not only in the economic sense but also in social processes more broadly. This can only be a first approximation to the term, however, because various modes of valuation differ and should not be forced into a complete congruence in conceptualization.

Marx (1990) famously argued that market forms of valuation that seem to rely on intrinsic qualities in establishing the differential worth of objects obscure how value is actually produced and appropriated – in processes of valorization – within exploitative social relations of class. Such exploitative relations exist not only in the production process but also in the

¹ The cartoon appeared in the magazine *Uykusuz*. I examined the issues since 2015 in view of their representations of key divisions in Turkish society.

² As Gusterson (2017) points out, the phenomenon in question has many names, such as “authoritarian populism,” “right-wing populism,” “cultural nationalism,” “neo-nationalism,” or “fascism 2.” I will later on use the concept of authoritarian populism for my analysis.

secondary circuit, where – for example – rent-seeking pushes processes of valuation in real estate that can lead to the dispossession of the working classes of their homes. Marxian value theory (e.g., Harvey 2017; Turner 2008) has highlighted the relational and processual dynamics of “value-in-motion” underlying such exploitation, including contradictions and crisis tendencies. As Harvey (2003, 2017) has highlighted, processes of devaluation, depreciation, and dispossession are a frequent and possibly necessary dimension of such processes. State practices of course play an important role in enabling, constraining, or counteracting them. But the role of the state in society cannot be reduced to this. Rather, the state works on and through a range of different power relations, and their modes of valuation, in society.

Of particular importance here is the modern state’s claim to national or popular sovereignty. Different – often institutionally engrained – conceptions of the nation or people as well as of the good citizen here differentially structure belonging and entitlement in the polity. The nation or people thus become important not only as “imaginary community” onto which a class politics can be displaced (Kalb 2011) but also as a historically shaped way of how people, in the plural, can make claims on the state, such as demands for rights or resources. Such claims-making can proceed among other through contestation about what constitutes the nation, people, or citizenship and therefore about who “belongs” to and is “entitled” in the polity.³ It relies here on modes of valuation that attribute relative worth in society. Critical scholarship has long deconstructed notions that social worth rests on inherent differences of human beings. Race – for example – is a construct that is tied to the power dynamics in the history of the nation-state as well as an emergent capitalism. Such schemes of relative worth can undergo – even if slowly – processes of reevaluation (e.g., Brodtkin 1998). Similar arguments have been made for other socially constructed categories, such as of gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or class, that are strongly tied to ideas of inherent worth and embedded in unequal relations of power, not least those of the state. But state modes of valuation can also be realized through more fluid, less established categories, such as the specter of the terrorist currently employed in Turkey.

There is, of course, a vast and divergent range of anthropological literature that has examined connections between various forms of value, values, or valuation in their specific contexts. A frequent focus of exploration has been how market forms of valuation relate to values inhering in reciprocity relations or other kinds of values in society (e.g., Graeber 2001; Eiss and Pedersen 2002; Lambek 2008; Otto and Willerslev 2013). Some recent studies have used such lenses to examine contemporary political developments (e.g., Graeber 2011; Iteanu 2013). In particular, the moral economy literature explored the potential of popular values in furthering or disrupting market logics (e.g., Edelman 2005; Carrier 2017).

The article adds to this varied literature an interest in the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which state and capitalist modes of valuation are used to buttress fragile and shifting alliances in hegemonic projects. It speaks here in particular to those conceptions of

³ This is shown by a host of literature on nation-making and citizenship. As Corrigan and Sayer (1985) have famously pointed out, hinting at the role of valuation here, state formation was a process of “moral regulation.” Systemic inequalities along multiple lines of difference were both reinforced by state practices working upon social identities and categories and erased through what they call a “double disruption”: on the one hand, the representation of the people as an “illusory community,” the nation, which implied a range of Others; and on the other hand, the individualization of people in the form of “citizens, voters, taxpayers, ratepayers, ... consumers...” (ibid, 5).

moral economy⁴ that explore the coming together of capital, class, state regulation, and complex fields of meaning in relation to the constitution of hegemony (Palomera and Vetta 2016, Gkintidis 2016) while reading the Gramscian notion of hegemony in line with Hall's (1988) and Roseberry's (1994) emphasis on alliance formation, in contrast to a frequent perspective on hegemony as cultural domination (Gkintidis 2016).⁵ How do hegemonic projects exploit synergies and manage contradictions between capitalist and state modes of valuation in an attempt to maintain alliances needed to remake the state and stabilize social dominance?⁶

I find this question particularly useful to examine the rise of contemporary “authoritarian populisms” (e.g., Scoones et al. 2018; Gusterson 2017). With this term, Stuart Hall elaborated on Poulantzas' notion of authoritarian statism, referring to an “an exceptional form of the capitalist state which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place” (Hall 1988), to analyze the rise of Thatcherism. In exchanging “statism” for “populism,” Hall wanted to emphasize “the ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralize the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate some strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project” (1988). The current conjuncture of course is one characterized by a reaction against the kind of world that Thatcherism, among others, helped to establish. However, similar to the moment when Thatcherism arose, it is also a reaction against state elites of multiple colors – such as social democrat – that are seen complicit in the dispossession that a now well-established neoliberalism in and of crisis enabled. Like earlier forms of authoritarian populism, current projects of state re-making hollow out liberal democratic institutions while maintaining the capitalist character of the state (Hall 1988).

When Hall mentions that hegemony requires a “*strategic* measure of popular consent” (1988, emphasis added), I take this to mean that consent need not be all-encompassing but sufficient to maintain the alliance on which the hegemonic project is reliant at any point in time. Authoritarian populist hegemonic projects rest on alliance-formation of a polarizing sort: various modes of valorization are used to bind allies into the hegemonic project, while devaluation and dispossession applies to those that are, at any given point in time, outside the alliance.⁷ They often draw here on histories of devaluation that find a reversal in the current

⁴ As Palomera and Vetta have pointed out, “There is a crossroads at which the concept of moral economy and that of hegemony inevitably meet, though recent scholarship on moral economy has not explored how” (2016).

⁵ See Crehan (2002) for a critical discussion of the origin and influence of such views of hegemony in anthropology.

⁶ The emphasis on capital and the state here is not to discount the importance of other forms of valuation (e.g., Graeber 2011; Koch 2017b), which are often at the center of moral economy perspectives: alliance-formation with subordinate populations will also depend also on how any given hegemonic project relates to popular forms of valuation that have their origin in the composite forms of everyday sociality. The latter are characterized by the interplay of quite different forms of valuation, not all of them easily reconcilable: we are all exposed to market forms of valuation (e.g., as workers and consumers) or to state forms of valuation in our relationship to institutions and agents of the state (e.g., as privileged or disadvantaged citizens) but beyond that also to forms of valuation that are embedded in practices of reciprocity (see also Carrier 2017) or tied to histories of faith-based institutions and so on. Hegemonic projects can be successful in incorporating subordinate groups into alliances if they resonate with key dimensions of everyday valuations.

⁷ In that sense, my interpretation of the concept of authoritarian populism in its emphasis on a *strategic* measure of consent for polarizing alliance-formation differs from Adaman et al., who use it to “demarcate its difference from a hegemonic project which is based on the acquisition of active consent, and to highlight that it implies the breakdown of a claim to rule backed by societal legitimacy” (2019).

moment: the reaction against past experiences of devaluation and dispossession generates new, and often more severe, ones. This sense of reversal is well expressed by Donald Kurtz's observation that "in any hegemonic formation ..., one subject category's moral and intellectual leadership is another subject category's coercion and domination" (Kurtz 1996).

Indeed, the importance of experiences or dispossession, disenfranchisement, and related precarities for the success of neo-nationalism or populism has long been emphasized (e.g., Gingrich 2006; Gökarkınel 2017; Edwards et al. 2012, 2017; Samet and Schiller 2017; Kalb 2009; Kalb and Halmai 2011). Such dispossession can be both "material and cultural" (Kalb 2009), that is, involving the withdrawal both of economic means and of attributions of social worth. Processes of differential valorization and devaluation produce precarities, injuries, and resentments that contribute to a distinctive "politics of affect" (Bangstad et al. 2019). In the Turkish case, the ongoing devaluation and dispossession cannot only be explained with the dynamics of capital and class (see also Goner and Rebello 2017; Gökarkınel and Türem 2019) – even when it is put to use for the appropriation of economic value. In examining the roots of contemporary authoritarian populisms in social inequalities such as of class or race within wider transformations of capitalism and the state (Rosa and Bonilla 2017; Szombati 2018; Kalb and Halmai 2011; Kalb 2018), it is crucial to examine state and capitalist modes of valuation as complex unity, neither to be fully separated nor fully subsumed to each other. A focus on the synergies and contradictions between state and capitalist modes of valuation, in the alliance-formation underpinning hegemonic projects, might here help explain not only the success of any particular (authoritarian populist) regime but also – in the case of Turkey⁸ – its shape-shifting qualities and possible breaking points.

Struggle for hegemony: devaluation and dispossession in a shape-shifting regime

AKP-governed Turkey fully conforms to Hall's description of the struggle for hegemony as the struggle to contest and disorganize an existing political formation; the taking of the "leading position" (on however minority a basis) over a number of different spheres of society at once, economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, and culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project. It should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project (1988).

In Turkey, a hegemonic project that had begun in the fabric of everyday life and civil society (see Tuğal 2009; White 2002) and conformed Islamism into a neoliberal project eventually turned into a full-scale re-making of the so-called Kemalist state and a re-valuing of established social hierarchies.

A hegemonic project is here understood as an alliance between different social forces, created through both ideological means and material incentives, that has become relatively successful in the ordering of social relations. (A counter-hegemonic project would be one that seeks to topple a currently dominant alliance, itself veering for dominance.) Such an alliance

⁸ The following empirical discussion is not intended to provide a full analysis of the ongoing hegemonic project in Turkey but rather to illustrate the argument on values and politics developed here.

encompasses both “dominant” and “subordinate” social groups that need not be defined only or primarily through class positioning (Gramsci 2000; Jessop 1991). The concrete alliance can change over time, just as the means to maintain dominance, and will necessarily have its points of instability and fissures (e.g., Roseberry 1994). Moreover, it differs in terms of its relation to social groups who are not immediately included in the alliance: it can rest on an expansive strategy, working toward incorporation, or it can be based on oppression of subordinate (e.g., Smith 2011) or oppositional (e.g., Bodirsky 2016) groups. Dominance of the political process within a polity is usually achieved via targeting and eventually dominating “formal” state institutions as well as key “civil society” organizations.⁹ Successful hegemonic projects will thus usually involve – more or less encompassing – practices of state re-making, economic intervention, and reworking of everyday socialities, contributing in the process to sedimented histories within which or against which later hegemonic projects must act.

At the core of the current hegemonic project in Turkey has been an alliance between the AKP as “political head” and different sectors of capital (called *yandaş sermaye*, partisan capital, by critics). There has moreover been a quite stable relation to conservative populations among the working class (in particular in the informal economy) and small bourgeoisie/middle classes. Beyond that, however, the hegemonic alliance included in the early years political liberals who hoped for a reform of the Kemalist state, the Gülen movement up until the open break in 2014, and more recently (parts of) the far-right nationalists. The strategic nature of alliance formation at the heart of the hegemonic project – different social forces being pulled in or pushed out as the politics of the day required – provided on the one hand enormous political flexibility and endurance but on the other hand also constituted a source of fragility that becomes particularly visible as the range of potential allies is successively diminished.

When the conservative AK Party first won the Turkish national elections in 2002, the result was greeted not only with dismay by those who feared a state-led Islamization of society but also by hopes of liberals both at home and abroad that it would push through reforms of an authoritarian Kemalist state. Initially, the AKP indeed pursued political liberalization and was very successful at further neoliberalizing Turkey. Through various shifts and turns, however, authoritarian state practices came more to the fore over the past decade – even though, of course, the repression of oppositional populations through police force, imprisonment, decree law, and material dispossession in recent years should not be seen as exceptional but in continuity with longer trajectories of the Turkish state/republic (Küçük and Özselçuk 2019; Jongerden 2018; Gökarkınel and Türem 2019). Nonetheless, the recent bout of repression was tied to a struggle about that state – about replacing (Kemalist) state elites and transforming the institutional set-up in particular through the introduction of a presidential system that would help secure the continuity of the regime.

This state re-making project went hand in hand with a revaluation of social-political relations and established hierarchies, based on a claim of diametrically opposed values in the population, and the assembling of new riches. The past 5 years were particularly salient in terms of widespread processes of devaluation and dispossession, framed as anti-terror politics, of (presumed) oppositional social groups. The devaluation of oppositional populations as traitors and terrorists opened up the possibility of their material and symbolic dispossession.

⁹ In both Marxist and poststructuralist perspectives, the state-society division is questioned. I refer here to the distinctions between state and society that result from a “distinction internal to bourgeois law” (Althusser 1977 in reference to Gramsci), while relations of governance cannot so easily be split up.

Affected first and foremost was the Kurdish political movement and population in the Southeast, when cities were turned to rubble with the rekindling of the conflict between the state and the PKK in the summer of 2015 and the civilian population was suffering under curfews and violence. Academics who had signed a petition expressing the demand to reenter into peace negotiations were charged with support for terror, many losing their jobs and facing multifold repression. This process was ratcheted up with the failed coup of 2016, which was blamed on the Gülen movement. Thousands lost their jobs in the resulting “clean-up” of the state; companies and foundations, NGOs, and media outlets were closed down, the assets appropriated by the state. This affected professions that had been socially valued, such as lawyers, professors, medical doctors, military, and police. The state of emergency declared in the wake of the coup facilitated the further dispossession of the Kurdish political movement as well as of oppositional groups of the radical and Kemalist left. Their political immunity lifted, elected politicians of the pro-Kurdish HDP were imprisoned and/or replaced as mayors. These multifold processes of dispossession were all framed as anti-terror politics and the dispossessed persons and groups defamed as traitors and supporters of terror.

The increasing reliance of the AKP regime on devaluation and dispossession primarily of the “other half” of the population not showing (electoral) support¹⁰ coincided with a general rise of authoritarian populist regimes in Europe and elsewhere in the context of a deep global crisis of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy, a European Union (EU) losing much of its shine with the Eurozone crisis and other internal problems, and Turkey’s crucial role for Europe in relation to the Syrian war and so-called “refugee crisis.” In this context, not only did the Turkish government make a concerted effort to cooperate with states such as Russia, despite often strained relations, in line with a wider formation of alliances between “illiberal” regimes in this period (Öniş 2017; Kalb 2018) but also the EU reacted only mildly against the repressive actions in Turkey first in the Kurdish Southeast in 2015 and then in the aftermath of the coup attempt. Turkey is thus far from an isolated or exceptional case; rather, it is a particular node in a globally interconnected process of reaction, within a neoliberal capitalism in and of crisis and a highly strained international conjuncture, against states seen to serve only the elites. What is somewhat particular to Turkey is the fact that both liberalizing and “illiberalizing” moments took partly place within a shape-shifting regime rather than in a succession of different ones, a process that the dynamics of alliance-formation through the activation of different modes of valuation can partly explain. Thus, initial liberalization took place during a time of alliance with liberals that could be forged because of a shared critique of Kemalist histories of (de)valuation; in turn, the break of an alliance with the Gülen movement and the necessity to forge ties with the nationalists to further the ongoing state re-making project led to a renewed politics of dispossession of the Kurdish population. Maintaining the core as well as the changing satellites of the alliance required the orchestration of state and capitalist modes of valuation.

Capitalist and state modes of valuation in the making and breaking of alliances

The orchestration of modes of valuation – past and present – is a key element in the process of alliance-formation and maintenance that constitute hegemonic projects and their viability.

¹⁰ Electoral success seems to often serve as a proxy for active consent in the case of authoritarian populisms but is also needed for the re-making of the state that hollows out even as it seemingly maintains liberal democratic institutions.

Gramsci pointed out that hegemony has both “ethico-political” and “economic” dimensions (2000). State and capitalist modes of valuation have their distinct dynamics and histories, even as they are always already mutually imbricated. They often, though not always or necessarily, can be made to work in sync with each other. Paying attention to these dynamics gives us an insight not only in the tremendous success of authoritarian populisms but also in their potential instabilities and breaking points.

Capitalist modes of valuation and the economic nucleus of the hegemonic project

A hegemonic project, to achieve and maintain dominance, will require an “economic nucleus” (Gramsci (2000)), that is, a degree of control over (capitalist) forms of value accumulation and distribution. This control is important not only to garner the resources required to shape the political process such as through state practices, but also for the formation and maintenance of alliances. Some political economic analyses highlight here that successful hegemonic projects are able to reconcile the interests of different factions of capital, but we can also think of hegemonic projects of the more polarizing sort (as in Turkey) shoring up alliances – for example, through clientelist ties – with some, but not other, sections of capital. Alliances with subordinate populations in turn rely in part on ensuring a sense of improvement in livelihoods, be it based on economic growth, capitalist development, upward mobility, or material hand-outs. These involve concessions within limits: in the capitalist context, hegemonic projects of course continue to rely on devaluation/dispossession of the working classes.

The AKP has built on and accelerated the process of economic liberalization in Turkey that was initiated with the coup of the 1980s and came to power in the wake of the profound economic crisis of 2001.¹¹ A key dimension of the “economic nucleus” of the current hegemonic project consisted of state-supported finance- and construction-driven growth (e.g., Çavuşoğlu and Strutz 2014; Balaban 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk 2019). The AKP governments’ hallmarks have been mega-projects and other investments in the built environment, realized in private-public partnerships and with foreign loans as well as through the commodification of public land.¹² Anyone using the subway in Ankara during the long years of AKP governance might have gauged the importance of this in ideological terms when watching the videos shown there that advertised the local governments’ actions: almost all of the spots showed construction sites or their final results. Beyond representing to people modernity, capitalist advancement,¹³ and the possibility of finding jobs and securing “modern” housing, this public-private nexus has been a key dimension of the dominant axis in the hegemonic alliance. Critical journalists and scholars in Turkey have highlighted the very explicit links – among others of kinship – existing between the AKP political elites and the

¹¹ For more detailed analyses of this time period from a hegemony perspective, see e.g., Akça et al. (2014).

¹² As Küçük and Özselçuk note: “... this iconic imaginary has derived its affective energy from an economy of revenge, inflicting a combined process of displacement and dispossession on large groups of the population. ... the construction of these iconic structures and the fantasmatic projection they provided for new forms of spatial reorganization, urban renewal, and real estate development have supported the dialectic of valorization and devalorization” (2019).

¹³ For a more in-depth analysis of the relation between hegemony building, desires for modernity, and infrastructure, see Kappeler (2017). In the case of Turkey as well, the modernizing developmentalist state was based on and continued to engender the desire for full inclusion into (capitalist) modernity.

companies in the construction business (which also often own media outlets etc.) as well as, more broadly, with the so-called “Islamic capital” (Balkan et al. 2015). Ensuring the continuity of the construction business thus is a key imperative for the continuity of the hegemonic project – and currently a highly troubled one.

The AKP has been perceived as very successful in the orchestration of capitalist valuation processes up until the past few years. International investors increasingly saw Turkey as an interesting site for investment in particular in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Moreover, although the AKP has done much to suppress labor, and the situation of workers continues to be precarious, it has also benefitted allied subordinate social groups concretely, not only through material hand-outs but also through perceived improvements in state infrastructures or the promise of upward mobility for conservative middle classes. Improved access to consumer credit has conveyed a general sense of upward mobility. President Erdoğan is, by his supporters, perceived as having turned Turkey into a global economic player, promising full modernity and development, symbolized in concrete. (Opponents in turn denounce this as a “cement economy.”) This support moreover needs to be seen against previous experiences of (currency) devaluation in the 1990s, where inflation was rampant and dispossessed already precarious populations, who blamed this in turn on (secular) politicians and foreign forces (Kurt 2018). Up until the current moment, inflation was comparatively low under the AKP government and also provided a sense of stability. In turn, current fluctuations are blamed by Erdoğan and others on “economic terrorism” and sabotage by foreign forces. In the current moment of currency devaluation and economic crisis, it is the more paramount to maintain the narrative of economic success and of concrete economic provisioning for the alliance both with capital and subordinate populations.

But the perceived economic success – with success attributed to self and failure blamed on others – that builds on longer histories of economic devaluation and developmental aspirations cannot fully explain the overwhelming electoral support for the current government (which in turn is only an approximate for “popular consent”). To get a fuller picture, and also to understand the contemporary turn to devaluation and dispossession, we need to have a look at past and present state forms of valuation that structure belonging and entitlement in the polity. This is not to excuse the ongoing politics of dispossession. Rather, it is to point out that values play a role in politics not simply by delineating different visions of social order and thus different political projects but by being tied into multiple histories of valorization and devaluation that underpin polarized alliance-formation.

State modes of valuation and hierarchies of belonging and entitlement

While hegemonic projects will always be dependent upon and therefore work through economic/capitalist forms of valuation, they cannot be reduced to their role in these (e.g., Hall 1988, Jessop 1991). This has to do with the importance of state modes of valuation to the political process, modes of valuation that are of multiple origins and were institutionalized in part by past hegemonic projects. They depend on the historically specific ways in which belonging and entitlement, and its concomitant forms of (de)valuation, are constituted in a polity. Dominant groups in an alliance can thus be dominant not (only) because of their class position but (also) because of the ways in which they relate to valuations of persons as full members of the nation, representatives of the people, good citizens, and the like. In reverse, groups can be subordinate not only in view of their class positions but also in view of

processes of (de-)valuation that deny them full belonging and entitlement. Alliance-formation depends on interpellations that gain their meaning in this contested terrain of (de-)valuations.

A key credo of the AKP over the past years has been that it is the force that reestablished popular sovereignty in Turkey by replacing a Kemalist state elite far removed from the people. A prominent imagery that informs this claim is the “white Turk- black Turk” binary that first emerged in the 1990s. While the notion of “white Turk” was first a self-ascription of European-looking, educated, urban “civilized” elites/middle classes which saw themselves hampered by a range of less European Others in Turkey, the AKP used the “black Turk” ascription to highlight that they were standing for the people denigrated in this way and suppressed by a Kemalist state run by the “white Turk” elite (see Arat-Koç 2018; Demiralp 2012).¹⁴ The sense of injury that this expressed is often easily brushed away as purely ideological by persons who might be seen to fall into the “white Turk” category. But the experience of devaluation of populations falling into the “black Turk” stereotype was real, as ethnographers have been able to show. This included questions of class and (lack of) urbanity but also religion, often in line with “Occidental aspirations” (e.g., Demiralp 2012; Zeybek 2012). Studies among Islamic believers in the Turkey of the 1990s have shown that they felt discriminated, both by the secularism of the Kemalist state and in everyday interactions (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014; Shively 2014). The AKPs claims – of revaluation – resonated because of a sense of oppression and injury, of devaluation, among conservative populations that directly stemmed from established state modes of valuation. This affected not only recent rural-urban migrants but also conservative middle classes, in particular through the much resented headscarf ban in schools and universities and the implicit or explicit (negative) valuations that “covered” women often face in everyday contexts. However much the secular-Islamic divide was overdrawn and constructed, it informed popular politics, public life, and personal anxieties in a very pronounced way since the 1990s (Demiralp 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Kandiyoti 2012). While the Kemalist state’s “assertive secularism was ... intrinsic to regime consolidation, making religious reaction ... a clear political threat” (Kandiyoti 2012), self-ascribed Kemalists also were highly emotionally invested in valuations of the state (Tambar 2009). It shaped their relation of belonging and entitlement in the state, just as it undermined that of others.

The Kemalist state, despite its secularism, had in fact long promoted a version of national identity that was built on ethnic Turkishness and (Sunni) Islam, with minorities and other groups that did not conform to this synthesis being denied full belonging and entitlement in the state (Tambar 2016; Ince 2012). Much of this hinged on particular aspirations of modernity (Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997), including both assimilationist and exclusionary logics of modern nation-building. In the 1990s, the Kemalist state had come under attack from many sides. Alongside of a critique of authoritarian modernization, state politics toward the Kurdish population, Alevites, and non-Muslim minorities including Armenians was critically interrogated by them as well as by political liberals. The initial strategy of alliance-formation headed by the AKP sought to integrate some of these social forces when the AKP promised to liberalize the Turkish state, not only by introducing a “less authoritarian” version of secularism but also by modifying hierarchical logics of citizenship structured along lines of ethnicity, in

¹⁴ The black Turk-white Turk ascription is a complex one that combines elements of Western aspirations, modernity, education, civilization, race/appearance, rural vs urban origin, religiosity, etc. One gets a good sense of the visual imagery that accompanies this in Turkey’s satire magazines, which draw heavily on it.

particular those that had devalued the Kurdish population. It was the AKP government that introduced cultural rights (even if often not implemented in practice) and proclaimed a so-called “democratic opening” to the Kurdish political movement. The relevance of this needs to be seen in particular against the violence of the 1990s in the Kurdish Southeast that was terribly destructive for the Kurdish population (e.g., Aras 2014).

The AKP here initially seemed to work against the historical sedimentations of the Kemalist state and some of the injuries of previous experiences of devaluation and dispossession, in particular, but not only, of conservative populations. The more recent hegemonic strategy in contrast channeled long-standing forms of devaluation into a politics of dispossession that opened up resources for the state and sought to subdue the opposition as well as strengthen and refashion the current alliance. This strategy was occasioned by a moment of crisis for the regime, which reacted to challenges to its state re-making project and the breaking of ties with key allies with the attempt to reshape alliances as the exigencies of the moment required.

Synergies and contradictions in the orchestration of valuation

The durability of a hegemonic project hinges in part on the exploitation of the synergies and the managing of the contradictions between different modes of valuation used for the alliance. As we see in the context of Turkey, this can be a direct response to ongoing or impending crisis.

To illustrate this, let us turn back to the recent practices of devaluation and dispossession sketched early on in this text. We need to understand them as fundamentally intertwined with a project of state re-making on part of the hegemonic project that at the time was challenged. In the summer of 2015, this crisis found expression in the electoral results of the pro-Kurdish, leftist HDP, which passed the 10% parliamentary threshold that had long been in place to keep Kurdish political parties out of Parliament and in this way undermined the majority of the AKP. A majority for the latter was however needed if it was to push through the introduction of a presidential system that then-President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had long pursued. The end to the peace process of the AKP government with the Kurdish political movement, occasioned by a revenge attack of the PKK, allowed to bring the nationalists into the boat until the reelections of November 2015 (announced after coalition talks were made to fail), where the AKP majority in Parliament was restored with the vote of nationalists and presumably of a part of the Kurdish population fearing further repression. The anti-terror-framed intervention in the Southeast shored up support by drawing on a nationalist rhetoric that always already devalued the Kurdish population within a framework of national security and unity but also evoked past injuries; it allowed for an alliance with the nationalist forces and a division of the opposition, split over the “Kurdish issue.” Thus, dispossession stabilized the hegemonic project in 2015 by bringing new social forces into the alliance (the nationalists) without alienating previous supporters, building here on a long-standing state devaluation of the Kurdish population. Dispossession moreover likely contributed to strengthening ties in the political-economic nexus. In September 2016, the government announced a reconstruction program for the cities destroyed in the violence of the preceding year, amounting to 140 billion Turkish Lira among others for the financing of new apartment buildings. Then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım presented this as an

“investment against terror,”¹⁵ but the important role of the construction sector in the Turkish economy during AKP rule also allows for other interpretations. Thus, the hegemonic project could be stabilized by exploiting a synergy between different modes of valuation: the existing devaluation of the Kurdish population paved the way for dispossession, which in turn could be used to form new ties and strengthen old ones in the alliance of which the AKP formed the political head.

The post-coup dispossessions continued with this logic but also broadened the politics of devaluation and dispossession beyond the Kurdish population. In the case of the Gülen movement, reputedly former allies were being dispossessed after the alliance had broken up (already in 2014). While the dismissals of reported Gülenists preceded the coup attempt, the latter – which the President reportedly called a “gift from god” – allowed for ratcheting up the process. The accumulation by dispossession enabled by emergency decree was tremendous: on the charge of being associated with a terrorist organization, the moveable and immovable assets of banks, foundations, companies, universities, health centers, and the like were transferred to the state, to be used or liquidated as seen fit.¹⁶ One can moreover think of the resources opened up for the regime by dismissals of state personnel, not all of which was replaced right away. In these cases, as well as in the case of Leftist and Kemalist state personnel dismissed, we see a devaluation of previously socially highly valued categories of people – teachers, doctors, and lawyers – as traitors and supporters of terror and a valorization of the “simple, uneducated” people as the true representors of the nation/people. The tapping into feelings of resentments and experiences of devaluation of the latter, along the lines of the “black Turk” stereotype, made it possible that such processes of revaluation and dispossession could contribute to the production of “consent” for the current regime and to the acceleration of a process of state re-making (both in terms of institutional form and personnel) that has long been in the cards.

However, the widespread dispossessions during the state of emergency also contributed to the international perspective that Turkey was no longer a safe haven for investment. Here is a potential contradiction: the politics of devaluation and dispossession that served the stabilization of the hegemonic project in the short run produced a climate of insecurity and unpredictability that contributed to an outflow of capital on which the regime depended and a de facto devaluation of wages, which might undermine it in the mid- to long run. The Turkish economy boomed not least because of the inflow of foreign capital into the country in particular in the context of quantitative easing around the 2010s. While this process had already slowed down since 2013, the rapid depreciation of the Turkish Lira in the past years possesses tremendous strains for the many households and companies indebted in foreign currency and relying on import goods. The Lira saw a near free-fall first in the fall and winter of 2016, the heyday of post-coup dispossessions, and then again in the summer of 2018.¹⁷ With tremendously increased consumer prices, people do not longer know how to make ends meet or have to cut down on the small luxuries of a middle-class life. Since the coup attempt, the government has been scrambling to prevent a major breakdown of the economy, albeit in often unorthodox ways that have further heightened the anxiety of international investors. These more general processes of devaluation and dispossession affect of course not only the opposition but also dominant and subordinate groups in the alliance.

¹⁵ As quoted on the news platform t24, Sept. 4, 2016, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/hukumetten-dogu-ve-guneydoguya-140-milyar-liralik-yatirim-programi-iste-aciklanan-projeler,358,291>

¹⁶ The Savings Deposit Insurance Fund, which oversees this process, notes on its website that as of March 2018, the financial worth of transferred companies (over 1000) that it administers amounts to close to 50 billion Turkish Lira. (<https://www.tmsf.org.tr/tr/Tmsf/Kayyim/kayyim.veri>, accessed February 2019). And this is only one part of the actual dispossessed property.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Akçay and Güngen 2019 for detailed analysis.

Time will tell whether the hegemonic project will be able to stabilize this situation far enough to ensure the survival of key “partisan” sectors of capital and maintain the support of subordinate populations or whether it might even compensate for it through other modes of valuation. More recently, the AKP’s loss in the municipal elections of 2019, where both Istanbul and Ankara went to the opposition after about two decades of AKP rule, as well as the recent formation of splinter-political parties from the AKP, signal both a more successful formation of alliances among the opposition and a potentially fundamental political rift at the core of the hegemonic alliance.

Concluding remarks

The future trajectory of the current hegemonic project in Turkey and its attempts at state re-making remain uncertain. Recent developments hint at the possibility of a fracturing of the core alliance within a context of crisis of economic valuation and a mounting reaction against the politics of dispossession in particular since the coup attempt. However, equally possible seems a course of authoritarian consolidation of the state that would reduce dependence on the successful orchestration of valuation.

In turn, a distinct barrier for alliance-formation in the “opposing” pole to the current hegemonic alliance has been the history of state devaluation and dispossession of the Kurdish population in Turkey, which fundamentally divides the nationalist, Kemalist, socialist, and Kurdish opposition. While there have been signs now and then that there could be a rapprochement, the tactics of divide and rule of the current government have so far helped impede an enduring alliance for a counter-hegemonic project.

To conclude, let us return to the cartoon with which we started. The “us” and “them” on the road sign, on closer observance, does not so much refer to unitary political identities with opposed values than to a polarizing logic of alliance-formation where the (access to) valorization of some is based on the devaluation and dispossession of others. Rather than focusing on a pursuit of value in distinct arenas, this perspective on valuation in politics thus shifts attention to political dynamics where state and capitalist modes of valuation are made to meet and mesh. This might well be relevant for an analysis of authoritarian populist hegemonic projects beyond the case of Turkey, where – in different ways – the histories of state and capitalist modes of appropriation and dispossession of value also inform the making and breaking of alliances.

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