

Paper for the Special Session: *The Green Economy's failing agenda: On energy, mining and ecological distribution conflicts*

Towards a better understanding of environmental conflicts in Turkey: Political ecology meets societal metabolism

Abstract

In the past two decades, the size of the economy in Turkey more than doubled, urbanisation rates rose from 60 percent to 75 percent, and the population grew by 32 percent (TURKSTAT 2013)—all putting immense pressure on Turkey's ecological system, a country with globally critical natural and biological reserves. This growth regime has been rather finance-led and construction-based, however, and fed in particular by public and private investments in the housing sector, heavy investments in the liberalised energy sector, and massive investments in infrastructure (Adaman et al., 2014). The corresponding reaction from civil society initially manifested as complaints against current or potential impacts from natural resource extraction, land use change, and energy production, and later turned into more structured environmental justice movements at the local and national scales (see, e.g. Coban, 2008; Avci et al. 2008).

This paper explores the remarkable spectrum of environmental conflicts in Turkey, and inspired by Martinez-Alier (2009) and Steinberger et al. (2012), aims to link them to the country's societal metabolism based on a field study undertaken as part of the EJOLT map of environmental injustices (www.ejolt.org). This is done by analysing 51 well-known cases in Turkey, as described by local activists and scholars, and then contrasting them to Turkey's biophysical (material and energy flows) and socio-economic data (e.g. Gini coefficient, HDI, corruption) for the period between 1960-2010. The cases were selected to illustrate critical issues in environmental conflicts in Turkey, and do not aim for statistical representation. While many of the reported cases focus on water conflicts (e.g. access to water, dam construction, wetlands), several are about mining activities, industrial activities and (mega) infrastructure projects, and others address energy production (e.g. coal, nuclear). Although limited, the compilation and analysis of these cases provides a basic, yet arguably crucial step toward informing public debate in Turkey on the structure of growth, the transformation of material and energy use, and the distribution of risks, benefits and costs within the development and environment nexus. Is Turkey on the path of an extractivist economy? If so, does present overall extraction and resource use serve Turkey's development purposes? And how do the growth dynamics and metabolic profile of Turkey relate to the recent intensification of environmental conflicts in the country?

A preliminary analysis reveals that while Turkey's growth is extractivist in nature, contrary to its Latin American counterparts, it is not export-driven, but rather based on the domestic consumption of resources founded on an ideal of reduced dependency on energy imports. This is clearly reflected in Turkey's development plans, called "Vision 2023" as well. Goals on the energy front, for instance, include doubling Turkey's energy generation capacity, mostly by relying on domestic potential. This means fossil fuels, especially coal, will be an important energy contributor for Turkey, leading to not only a carbon-intensive brown economy that will have heavy repercussions for climate change, but an increase in social unrest against thermal plants as well.

Therefore, while Turkey seems to be a booming economy, the environmental and social performance of the country tells a different development story (Adaman and Arsel 2005; Şekercioğlu et al. 2011). Whenever growth was achieved, this was done without addressing deficiencies in the economy, such as low savings rates, unsustainable current account deficit, and large external borrowing (Rodrik 2013; Pamuk 2014), and at the expense of severe—and sometimes irreversible—societal and environmental harm. Turkey ranked 109th among all countries in the 2012 Environmental Performance Index, a composite index of “environmental health” and “ecosystem vitality”. When biodiversity and habitat conservation was considered apart from other factors, the country ranked 121st on the same index. Unfortunately, over the past decade, Turkey improved only on issues related to air pollution and the overexploitation of its fish stock. On the social front, it is also telling that Turkey has a bad record regarding income distribution, for within OECD countries, it ranks second only to Mexico in terms of income disparity.

The primary sources of tension here seem to be the presence of a highly modernist state ideology, and an unquestioned commitment to rapid economic growth in the absence of a deliberative planning process and a democratic, scientific culture. Indeed, state ideology in Turkey has been highly modernist since the very founding of the Republic, and is rooted in the idea of “catching up” with the West. This entails blind commitment to rapid economic growth, an unquestioning confidence in scientific and technical processes and their application to economic and social processes, and human mastery of nature (Adaman and Arsel 2005; Konak 2008).

We believe that linking local movements to the metabolic profile of the country is crucial in revealing the intricate relationship between the state, capital, and the environment, and showing people that environmental problems are actually not technical in nature, but interlinked and largely structural and political. This will help local environmental movements see the big picture more clearly and question the sustainability of Turkey’s growth pattern not only in economic, but also in social and environmental terms. Overall, the challenge remains for social movements in Turkey to link local movements both to one another, and to an overarching national and global movement, capable of robust and sustained action with transformative power at the national scale.

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Short abstract (150 words)

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