

## **De-growth as Counter-Hegemony? Lessons from Turkey**

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### *Summary:*

That degrowth agenda has not taken an explicit stance vis-à-vis the organization of the economic relations has been a point of sharp criticism, especially regarding the viability of a degrowth trajectory. While the critiques have predominantly emphasized the material role of economic growth in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, we argue that the notion of growth also functions as a powerful ideal that shapes state-society relationships and social-collective imagination. We demonstrate this by discussing the making of state hegemony in Turkey, where the notion of economic growth is deeply imprinted in the broader practices of the state to legitimize its existence and dominates the social imaginary in a way that cannot be easily dismissed. Thus, commitment to economic growth involves stakes much beyond economic/material ones, and extends to the whole constellation of state-society relationships and the historical, mutual shaping of these two spheres. Against this backdrop, the possibility of not only effectuating, but also imagining and desiring, degrowth calls for a radical reconfiguration of state-society relationships.

*Keywords:* Hegemony, state-society relationships, Turkey, growth-fetishism.

### *Abstract:*

Degrowth, as a concept as well as a political mobilizer, acquired increasing force in motivating both intellectual/analytical thinking and activism-practice around imagining and enacting alternative ways of organizing society-economy-environment relationships. The literature on degrowth has reached an impressive volume and scope, ranging from issues of infrastructural adjustment to the governance of agrofood systems, from the architecture of new currency systems to social enterprises.

Although it strikes a close chord with demands and mobilizations in favor of non-capitalist futures, the fact that degrowth has not taken an explicit stance vis-à-vis the organization of the economic relations has been a point of sharp criticism. It has been argued, time and again, that degrowth cannot be a viable trajectory under the systemic drive

for accumulation within capitalism, and that the degrowth agenda should be pushed hand-in-hand with anti-capitalist politics. Proponents of degrowth, on the other hand, often respond by pointing out that non-capitalist economies can also be –and indeed did– growth-oriented, and that there is nothing inherently degrowth within socialism.

Perhaps more significantly, these critiques reveal the ways in which growth figures as a fundamental pillar of the economic and political systems that govern our lives. While the critiques have predominantly emphasized the material role of economic growth in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, we argue that the notion of growth also functions as a powerful ideal –a constituting element of hegemony – that shapes state-society relationships and social-collective imaginary that might prove hard to dispense with. We demonstrate our argument by discussing the case of state-making in Turkey and the fundamental role played by the ideal of growth-oriented modernization in shaping state-society relationships.

### *Growth Fetishism and the Unbearable Charm of Modernization in Turkey*

Achieving modernization and economic progress has indeed been a long-standing objective of Turkish policymakers. Beginning especially with the decline of the Ottoman Empire during the 18th century, and formally instituted with the foundation of the modern Republic, the idea of “catching up” with the West has been central to politics in Turkey. Although modernization/development<sup>1</sup> came to mean a transformation process that surpassed a solely economic one, there was, and still is, a central role for growth within it: rapid economic growth, fueled by the application of modern science and technology to economic processes, has been seen to provide support to the newly-created political and social order. Thus, growth policies have been given priority, based on the assumption that their achievement would automatically resolve social and political issues as well—albeit sometimes with a lag. In addition, a wide range of ideologies within Turkish politics shares the common faith in economic growth as the precondition of progress. While the very foundations of the modern republic have been challenged by various political forces, ranging from revolutionary socialism to Islamic fundamentalism, the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Modernization/development is used interchangeably throughout the article to highlight the fact that the two have come to mean the same thing, both in the eyes of the state and in the social imaginary.

development through rapid economic growth is a *sine qua non* for progress has remained uncontested.

We argue that the roots of this undisputed appeal and dominance of growth-oriented modernization should be searched in the configuration of state-society relationships; in particular, the way that the state presented itself and legitimized its claim to rule by drawing up a broad consensus for its existence in Turkey. The Turkish state has historically achieved its power and legitimacy, first and foremost, from the promise of fulfilling the ideal of modernization. The urgency to modernize and realize economic development constituted a collective interest, an outlook for the whole nation envisaged as an organic unity without internal divisions, where even questioning its validity was considered unpatriotic. Through this, the Turkish state was able to represent itself as a neutral institution that embodied the collective will of the people, and thus acquire the consent of the society to its claim rule. That is to say, the idea of modernization/development was integral to the state's ability to govern not by naked coercion, but by being backed with the consent of its constituency. On the other hand, the aspiration to modernize became what united an internally-fragmented society along with different dimensions of socio-economic inequality and prevented the formulation of demands arising out of intra-society divisions.

Most recently, the ruling of Justice and Development Party (JDP) has not only retained the historically-strong commitment to modernization/development, but adopted a radically-aggressive agenda in implementing it, the main pillars of which are state-facilitated (if not led) construction bubble and destructive energy investment. Modernization/development continues to be, arguably more effective than ever, constituted as the collective interest through which the consent of the ruled is acquired and the marginalized sections of the society are co-opted into the political system. Especially accelerated during this period is the capitalization of the natural environment, privatization of realms previously under public ownership, and the expropriation and redistribution property through "legal" means such as urban transformation.

In that sense, JDP has successfully mobilized a spatial politics, for which the idea of modernization/development continues to form an indispensable basis: monumental projects such as the highways, power plants, a third bridge to be built on the Bosphorous and a canal to connect Marmara to Black Sea, do not only reproduce the existence of the state in the most visible way and produce the image that it is indeed working hard for its people, but also materialize the very ideal of modernization/development in the most effective way and receive admiration from different groups in the society. On the other hand, this

spatialized, construction-led modernization/development model reproduce the consent of large sections in the society, not only through the distribution of rents to large masses and the opening up of new areas of investment, but also by the effective persuasion of middle-lower classes through housing property and consumption opportunities. The parallel silencing and de-legitimization of social struggles against ecological destruction and urban transformation, with the close resonation of construction with modernization in the social imagery, has buttressed this strategy. All in all, the notion of modernization/development has been worked and reworked to cement state hegemony in the familiar ways discussed above, albeit with different manifestations and at different layers.

In the specific context of Turkey, the notion of development *qua* economic growth is deeply imprinted in the broader practices of the state to establish itself within the social sphere and legitimize its existence. In a parallel vein, the ideal of growth-oriented modernization dominates the social imaginary in a way that cannot be easily dismissed. That is to say, commitment to economic growth involves stakes much beyond economic/material ones, and extends to the whole constellation of state-society relationships and the historical, mutual shaping of these two spheres. Against this backdrop, the possibility of not only effectuating, but also imagining and desiring, degrowth calls for a radical reconfiguration and democratization of state-society relationships in Turkey.