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Research Article

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Anti-intellectualism or Populism *alla turca*

Funda Gençoğlu*

This article deals with how populism as a global phenomenon manifests itself in Turkish politics. It argues that the core element of populism *alla turca* is anti-intellectualism, and that although populism has traditionally been a component of the discourses of major actors in Turkey, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, in its current form, its content is in large part anti-intellectualism. It is an ideological apparatus consciously used by those in power to reproduce and strengthen the neoliberal conservative hegemony in Turkey which has been installed and consolidated during the rule of Justice and Development Party since 2002. It also claims that the phenomenon of populism and its increasing popularity – theoretical and practical – needs to be linked to the concept of hegemony. Based upon the concepts of hegemony and populism, as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who are also prominent scholars of populism, this article tries to show that populism is the core of any hegemonic relation as much as anti-intellectualism is the core of populism *alla turca*.

Keywords: Populism, anti-intellectualism, counter hegemony, neoliberal conservatism, radical democracy

Introduction

This article deals with the giant, dark shadow of anti-intellectualism that haunts social and political life in Turkey. Cast over academia, the media, primary education, popular culture, high culture and science alike, this shadow makes life beneath more and more difficult each day. Moving from the contention that the two undertakings that Marx mentioned in his eleventh thesis – understanding the world and changing the world – are complementary rather than contradictory, this article takes its first step: to decipher how and why we have found ourselves in a setting whose most distinguishing feature is anti-intellectualism. This is necessary since a thorough understanding of the current situation is the prerequisite of any endeavour to surpass it. As an outcome of my own attempt to understand the dynamics of this ever-rising anti-intellectualism in Turkey, which has become so overwhelming, I have come to think that it would be enlightening to contextualise it within an analysis of the conservative neoliberal hegemony in Turkey. In this respect, I assert that anti-intellectualism is an ideological apparatus consciously used by those in power to reproduce and strengthen the neoliberal conservative hegemony in Turkey which has been installed and consolidated during the rule of the Justice and Development Party since 2002. In arguing this, I rely on the

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concept of hegemony as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and, additionally, Laclau's unique conceptualisation of populism.

The significance of Mouffe and Laclau's theoretical framework for my purposes in this article is twofold. On the one hand, it conceptualises socio-political life in terms of power relations, inviting us to come to terms with the fact that power relations are not erasable; thus, it formulates the main task of political analysis and political struggle as that of deciphering these relations with the aim of changing them. On the other hand, since this claim is associated with the idea that the current configuration of power relations is contingent and is always open to be challenged, it brings with itself the idea that political identities are always open to be re-created too. So, from this perspective, the effort of deciphering how the current configuration of power relations has taken place is at the same time an effort to understand how political identities are created, and eventually how a hegemony is installed. The uniqueness of this theoretical framework is its conceptualisation of populism as this very act of creation of political identities as such. That is to say that, rather than being an anomaly or irregularity, populism in this specific sense of the term is intrinsic to politics. From this point of view, any attempt to understand how a hegemonic relation is installed, consolidated and re-installed is at the same time an attempt to understand this process of the creation and re-creation of political identities through different articulations in the political realm, which is populism by definition. It is in this sense that an analysis of anti-intellectualism is directly related to an analysis of hegemony, and hence with an analysis of populism. Consequently, the installation of hegemony is built upon the creation of collective political identities of "us versus them" as a result of two spontaneous acts: drawing a boundary between us and them on the one hand; and the establishment of a chain of equivalence within each of these popular identities. These two in turn correspond to the very act of populism. As I will show below, the current neoliberal conservative hegemony in Turkey has sought and found different ways of doing this, meaning creating an external boundary as well as overtaking the representation of a chain of equivalence. And for some time it has resorted to anti-intellectualism for that purpose. It is in this sense, then, that I argue that anti-intellectualism has become the most distinguishing characteristic of the latest version of populism *alla turca*. I use the phrase "the latest version of populism *alla turca*" since populism has traditionally been a component of the discourses of major actors in Turkey, on both the left and the right of the political spectrum.¹ However, recently, there has been an alteration in its current form: its content is in large part anti-intellectualism.

Consequently, this article deals with how populism as a global phenomenon manifests itself in Turkish politics, with an aim of contributing to a discussion about a counter-hegemony. In that respect, its main argument is twofold. On the one hand, it argues that the core element of populism *alla turca* is anti-intellectualism. On the other hand, it argues that the concept of populism and,

¹ Necmi Erdoğan states that "the history of political discourses in Turkey is a history of populisms at the same time" and analyses as cases in point the populism of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi- CHP) in the 1970s under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit and the populism of radical left/socialist movements such as Dev-Yol. See, Erdoğan, Necmi. 1998. 1970'lerde Sol Popülizm Üzerine Notlar. *Toplum ve Bilim* 78, Güz, 22-37, 25.

relatedly, hegemony, as developed by Mouffe and Laclau, which lies at the centre of the theory of radical democracy, is a useful analytical tool to make sense of the current state of affairs – and to reflect upon a change.

Populism and Populism *alla turca*

Although it is a cliché in social sciences to denote a particular decade as a turning point of political history, in the case of the 2010s there is enough evidence to say so: the early 2010s witnessed the rise of protest movements in various parts of the world, such as the student/youth protests in the United Kingdom, Greece, Chile, Mexico and Hong Kong; *Los Indignados* in Spain, the Pots and Pans Revolution in Iceland, the Arab Uprisings, the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States, and the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey, all of which were unprecedented in terms of the protests' spontaneous and collective nature, magnitude, escalation and unconventional forms. The second half of the 2010s, in turn, have witnessed the rising popularity of populism as a global phenomenon, dominating the political agendas in diverse contexts from European Union countries and the US to Latin America.

Academic curiosity about populism came to prominence with the formation of the populist radical right party family in Europe in the 1980s.² Although they did not present a significant political force until the 1990s, since then populist parties and movements (mostly right-wing) have rapidly spread across the continent and presently constitute an important undercurrent in the politics of many European countries.³ Consequently, populism has started to draw ever-increasing scholarly attention in different parts of the world. Turkey is no exception to these global trends. Rising curiosity about populism has found reverberation in the political landscape of Turkey too; it constitutes the starting point of this article.

Earlier literature on populism tended to see it as “a pathological form, pseudo- and post-democratic, produced by the corruption of democratic ideals,”⁴ whereas contemporary analyses reject this distinction. Contemporary studies on populism try to contextualise it with reference to various social, political, economic and cultural phenomena. In this respect, it is possible to point out several themes addressed by scholars working on the subject. The first theme, for instance, is the connection between populism and the large-scale transformations characterising global politics such as the end of the Cold War, the rise of neoliberalism, the crisis of liberal democracy, and the crisis of global capitalism. Van Biezen and Wallace argue that the rise of populism can be conceived as a manifestation of the “huge variety of forms of opposition to the conventional holders of power who appear to have been unable to respond successfully to new and pressing societal and economic challenges.”⁵ Consequently, they argue, “the old convictions that once characterised politics

² Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2012. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 147-74, 155.

³ Ingrid van Biezen and Helen Wallace. 2013. Old and New Oppositions in Contemporary Europe *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 289-313, 295.

⁴ Taguieff quoted in van Biezen and Wallace, *Old and New Oppositions*, 295.

⁵ Van Biezen and Wallace, *Old and New Oppositions*, 289.

in the European liberal democracies are gradually eroding.”⁶ Albertazzi and Mueller also contextualise the rise of populism by showing the incompatibility between the key principles of liberal democracy and populism.⁷ Another theme in the literature is an attempt at the categorisation of populism. For instance, Kenneth Robins distinguishes four types of populism – organic, labour, partisan and electoral – based on their organisational expressions in different national settings or stages of socio-economic and political development.⁸ Mudde and Kaltwasser compare the European and Latin American contexts, giving rise to “exclusionary” and “inclusionary” populism, respectively.⁹ Another categorisation is inspired by the left-right spectrum, as mentioned above, and distinguishes between right populism and left populism. Mouffe, for instance, insists on reflecting on the possibility of leftist populism as a way of initiating and installing an alternative to the rise of the populist right, especially in Europe.¹⁰

Last but not least, trying to formulate a definition of populism is yet another theme characterising the contemporary literature. Laclau makes a detailed review of the literature on populism¹¹ and reveals a “reluctance – or difficulty – in giving the concept any precise meaning,” noting “the absence of notional clarity” [and] “the multiplicity of phenomena which have been subsumed under this label.”¹² As a way of dealing with the great variety of approaches aiming to conceptualise, contextualise, or categorise populism, Cas Mudde has proposed a definition which has later been called the “minimal definition” of populism: “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”¹³

Following a different path, Laclau and Mouffe¹⁴ developed a unique conceptualisation of populism. They conceptualised it as the performative act of creating a collective identity via the establishment of a boundary between “us” and “them.” This is what, they argued, the left has globally failed to do since the 1980s. They maintained that the left was mistaken to argue that the centrist consensus could be seen as the sign of a more mature democracy; rather it was a danger for democracy, and it created the conditions for a right-wing populism to grow.¹⁵ Consequently, they insisted on the pursuit of left-wing populism that aims to create a people, a boundary between us and them, or a collective will in the Gramscian sense of the term. This article is a

⁶ Van Biezen and Wallace, *Old and New Oppositions*, 289.

⁷ Albertazzi, Daniele and Sean Mueller. 2013. Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland and Switzerland. *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 343-71.

⁸ Robins, Kenneth. 2006. Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America. *Comparative Politics* 38(2), 127-48.

⁹ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism*, 155.

¹⁰ Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics Thinking the World Politically*. London and New York: Verso.

¹¹ Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso, 3-20.

¹² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 3-5.

¹³ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism*.

¹⁴ Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985/2014. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London and New York: Verso.

¹⁵ Gildas le Dem. 2017. *interview with Chantal Mouffe*. *Verso*, 04. August (accessed: 30. October 2018).

demonstration that populism *alla turca* is yet another occasion to confirm Mouffe and Laclau's criticisms and their conceptualisation of populism.

As mentioned above, the theoretical perspective developed by Mouffe and Laclau, which is known as the theory of radical and plural democracy, is directly linked to the central concern of this article: I perceive democratic struggle as a dialectical relationship between the dynamics of two simultaneous processes, namely, understanding the world and changing the world; and these processes correspond to analysing/deciphering hegemony and deliberating on counter-hegemony in Mouffe and Laclau's theory. Another reason why this theory is appealing for a discussion on anti-intellectualism is its claim that "the subject positions [which are] the points of antagonism and the forms of struggle," are not predetermined by their "own nature," *a priori* to political articulations;¹⁶ rather, they are "fully dependent on political articulations and not on entities constituted outside the political field."¹⁷ Accordingly, the identity of the political subject is constituted through the political realm and through her performative acts; it is always incomplete because (and/or therefore) it is always open to new articulations. This is the heart of radical democracy's understanding of politics/the political. This understanding leads to the claim that "the open and incomplete character of every social identity permits its articulation to different historico-discursive formations."¹⁸ Accordingly, "politics does not consist in simply registering already existing interests but plays a crucial role in shaping political subjects."¹⁹

There are two upshots of this theoretical framework. The first is related to our conceptualisation of populism. If "ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, floating signifiers, whose very identity is "open," overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements," it follows that hegemony emerges when "the multitude of 'floating signifiers' [is] structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain element which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning."²⁰ Indeed, this process is what Laclau calls populism *per se*. Laclau insists that "progress in understanding populism requires, as a *sine qua non*, rescuing it from its marginal position within the discourse of the social sciences" as well as from the ethical condemnation, demotion and denigration of populism confining it to the realm of the unthinkable.²¹ For him, "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such,"²² since populism is a "performative act endowed with a rationality of its own;" it is "a constant dimension of political action which necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourses" rather than being "a transitional moment derived from the immaturity of social actors."²³ In this respect, "populism is,

¹⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 5.

¹⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xii.

¹⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 100.

¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xvii.

²⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. 1989/2008. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London and New York: Verso, 95.

²¹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 19.

²² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67.

²³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 18.

quite simply, a way of constructing the political,”²⁴ thus it is intrinsic to the constitution and consolidation of hegemony as well as the installation of counter-hegemony.

Second, this theory tells us that “the present conjuncture, far from being the only natural or possible societal order, is the expression of a certain configuration of power relations.”²⁵ This means that “things could always be otherwise, and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities ... Every order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices that attempt to disarticulate it in an effort to install another form of hegemony.”²⁶

Through the lenses of this theory, one can see that the current neoliberal-conservative hegemony in Turkey was installed by the ruling Justice and Development Party by fixing the meanings of free-floating ideological elements such as “conservative,” “woman,” “Muslim,” “family,” “state,” “stability,” “progress,” “security,” “terror/terrorist.” It stopped their sliding and determined their identity by quilting them with neoliberal conservatism. It structured in time a unified field and created a popular identity among those social demands that had been excluded by Kemalism, the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic, which remained the unchallenged official ideology of the state until the 1990s. Kemalism was shaped, mainly during the 1930s, by the speeches and writings of the founding leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and his close associates; it has come to be known as Kemalism or Atatürkism, comprising six basic principles (also known in Turkey as the “Six Arrows”): statism, secularism, populism, nationalism, reformism and republicanism. The coming to power of the AKP in 2002 was the first symptom of counter-hegemony. Until then, a chain of equivalence had been established among the particularities that the hegemonic Kemalism excluded: Islamic and Kurdish identities, which had been repressed by the state; newcomers to the major cities following huge waves of internal migration; small-and-medium scale businesses outside industrial and commercial centres like Istanbul and Ankara, which were under the control of big business; liberal opinion leaders who saw the state in Turkey overpowered and deaf to society’s demands for individual rights and liberties. These were different social demands that emerged under different circumstances, with different priorities. Despite being different from each other, these social demands were equal in being excluded from the hegemonic configuration of power relations, or in excluding an element as the outside in order to constitute itself. Laclau conceptualises populism on the basis of the tension between differential and equivalential logics, since he argues that all identity is constructed within the tension between these two logics.²⁷ Hegemonic relations imply that “from the very beginning we are confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other.”²⁸ There is a frontier between the power and the social demands that it left unmet; and there is a chain of equivalence among themselves. So, the AKP succeeded in establishing a

²⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, xi.

²⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, xvi.

²⁶ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 2.

²⁷ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70.

²⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 86.

hegemonic relation in the sense of assuming the representation of a universality transcending it *vis-à-vis* an excluded element, Kemalism. It took over the role of mediator for all other particularities comprising the chain of equivalences. In other words, it “quilted” different social demands, while in due course transforming its own body. In this way, it created a popular identity of “us” as opposed to “them.” This corresponds to populism’s division of the social scene into two camps: the “regime,” the “oligarchy,” the “dominant groups” and so on, for the enemy; the “people,” the “nation,” the “silent majority,” and so on, for the oppressed underdog.”²⁹

In time, the neoliberal conservative hegemony consolidated itself by giving weight to one – among others – of the social demands that had been left unmet by the unresponsive power. Thus, since 2002, Turkish politics has witnessed different formulations of the division of the society into two camps. So far, this division has been formulated in terms of the dichotomy of, for instance, i) civil/military bureaucracy versus the elected politicians; ii) big business versus the Anatolian bourgeoisie; iii) Kemalist nationalists versus European Union advocates; iv) the secular versus the religious/pious.

What I am trying to highlight in this article is that, recently, there has been a shift in the quilting point and in the formulation of the division of the society into two camps: the new formula that the ruling party uses to create the popular identity of “us” has become anti-intellectualism. The collective identities of “us” and “them” have started to be re-constructed predominantly through the dichotomy of “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” rather than the previously used dichotomies. As will be shown below with the help of several examples, the concepts of “intellectual,” “academician,” “professor,” and “feminist,” as well as “science” “knowledge,” and “wisdom,” are utilised to consolidate anti-intellectualism as defined in this article.

Anti-intellectualism in Turkey

Colleen J. Shogan defines anti-intellectualism through its opposite, intellectualism: “Intellectualism is dedication to acquiring knowledge from reason, contemplation, or analytical thought; anti-intellectualism is the attainment of knowledge through instincts, character, moral sensibilities, and emotions.”³⁰ Thus, anti-intellectualism is characterised by the disparagement of the rational complexity associated with intellectual pursuits; exhibition of distaste for the smugness and superiority that is believed to accompany intellectual life; suspicion and cynicism against intellectuals.³¹

In exploring anti-intellectualism, Daniel Rigney’s categorisation is quite illuminating.³² Rigney lists religious anti-rationalism, populist anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism as the three types of anti-intellectualism. What this article argues is that what makes populism *alla turca* a particularly

²⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 87.

³⁰ Shogan, Colleen. 2007. Anti-Intellectualism in the Modern Presidency: A Republican Populism. *Perspectives on Politics* 5(2), 295-303.

³¹ Collen, *Anti-Intellectualism in the Modern Presidency*, 295-96.

³² Rigney, Daniel. 1991. Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter. *Sociological Inquiry* 61, 434-51.

interesting case in point is the coexistence of all three. In the following pages I will demonstrate the working of all three types of anti-intellectualism in Turkey with reference to the words and deeds of the ruling Justice and Development Party, which has been in power since 2002.

As an academic who has been teaching political thought and political theory at both undergraduate and graduate levels for several years, the following passage has always seemed to me as the most astonishing part of Marx's thought:

"A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many architects in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act."³³

For a person who looks at the world from this point of view, to witness a widespread reluctance to critical and imaginative thinking is upsetting, to say the least. The situation in Turkey is getting more unbearable each day due to the consolidation of anti-intellectualism with its three versions. As Rigney explains, each type of anti-intellectualism has unique expressions and manifestations in social and political life. *Religious anti-rationalism* is characterised by opposition to the questioning of authority, opposition to and/or fear of reason and relativism and their outcomes, and explicitly opposing science. *Populist anti-elitism* is characterised by devaluation of "book learning," devaluation of high academic standards, advocating common people's interests, and attacks on intellectuals. *Unreflective instrumentalism* is characterised by impatience with impracticality, theory and utopianism, and the advocacy of less autonomous educational institutions. The upshot of all these has been the extensive demotion and disparagement of all kinds of intellectual activity in Turkey. This is disturbing as much as it is disappointing, since it causes a sense of worthlessness among those who are eager to use their whole potential and capacity to change the world and who still try to hold on to their hope for a better world. These feelings are important, as how we feel about the world we live in is closely related with what we think about it. This is somehow parallel to Jean Jacques Rousseau's formulation of the relation between reason, passion and understanding as he put it in *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*:

"Whatever moralists may hold, the human understanding is greatly indebted to the passions, which, it is universally allowed, are also much indebted to the understanding. It is by the activity of the passions that our reason is improved ... and it is impossible to conceive any reason why a person who has neither fears nor desires should give himself the trouble of reasoning. The passions, again, originate in our wants, and their progress depends on that of our

³³ Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Volume I, Part 3. Chp. 7, 127. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>

*knowledge; for we cannot desire or fear anything, except from the idea we have of it.*³⁴

The best way to justify my claim that all three types of anti-intellectualism have become an inseparable part of our lives in Turkey would be to present some examples of statements that someone might read and hear while watching TV or surfing the web.

Anti-intellectualism as Religious Anti-rationalism

I think that the following are clear examples of *religious anti-rationalism*, which is an aspect of anti-intellectualism implying i) opposition to the questioning of authority, ii) opposition to and/or fear of reason and relativism and their outcomes, iii) explicit opposition to science.

The first example is the detention of eleven senior members of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), including its chairman, after the association criticised Turkey's military operation in northern Syria, saying "No to war, peace immediately." That prompted President Tayyip Erdogan to accuse the TTB of treason for criticising the military operation.³⁵ The second example is the announcement by the head of curriculum for the ministry of education that Charles Darwin's theory was "controversial" and would be removed from lower school programmes by 2019.³⁶ This, in turn should be taken into account together with statistical data showing the dramatic increase in the number of new schools opened as Islamic vocational schools (*İmam-Hatip*) – 1,002 new *İmam-Hatip* schools were opened in the academic year 2016-2017.³⁷ Parallel to the removal of Darwin's theory, the Minister of National Education stated that the curriculum, effective from the start of the 2017-2018 school year, obliges Turkey's growing number of *İmam Hatip* religious schools to teach the concept of jihad.³⁸ On top of all these, we heard the Minister of National Education describing the new curriculum as "the most democratic, most scientific and modern curriculum ever."³⁹

Indeed, the tense relationship between the neoliberal conservative hegemony and feminists in the country is another perfect example of anti-intellectualism in the form of religious anti-rationalism: the feminist challenge against the religio-conservative gender climate is an excellent example of questioning authority, and the response to it is a perfect example of *opposition to questioning of authority as well as opposition to and fear of reason and*

³⁴ Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 10-11.

³⁵ Gulsen, Solaker / Erkoyun, Ezgi / Toksabay, Ece and Tuvan Gumrukcu. 2018. [Turkey Orders Detention of Top Doctors Over Criticism of Syrian Offensive](#). *Reuters*, 30. January (accessed: 31. October 2018).

³⁶ Sanchez, Raf. 2017. [Turkey Will Stop Teaching Evolution in Schools, Education Ministry Says](#). *Telegraph*, 23. June (accessed 31. October 2018).

³⁷ N.N. 2017. [Bir yılda 1002 imam hatip](#). *Birgun*, 12. September (accessed: 30. October 2018).

³⁸ Osborne, Samuel. 2017. [Turkey's New School Curriculum Drops Evolution and Will Teach Concept of Jihad](#). *Independent*, 19. July (accessed: 30. October 2018).

³⁹ N.N. 2017. [Milli Eğitim Bakanı İsmet Yılmaz: Yapılmış en bilimsel, en çağdaş müfredat](#). *CNNTURK*, 05. September (accessed: 30. October 2018).

*relativism and their outcomes.*⁴⁰ The concept of gender climate implies the “discourses and practices on gender relations that are accepted, prevalent and/or dominant in private and public life and that determine the modes of thinking, acting and morality regarding gender relations.”⁴¹ Gender climate “reflects the attitudes and opinions, which are propounded by the media and by popular discourses, [and] it affects the ways in which it is considered acceptable to speak about gender.”⁴² Besides, the AKP’s approach to gender issues can be seen as “a litmus test through which [its] large scale conservatism crystallises.”⁴³ The most obvious examples are AKP’s “strengthening the family policies”⁴⁴ that aim to cultivate the family as a moral kernel of the socio-political order,⁴⁵ and the replacement of the Ministry of Women and Family with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in 2011. Not only are these destructive steps practically eliminating mechanisms working for gender equality, but the official discourse has also become laden with the affirmation of traditional gender roles and “any challenge to such roles or to the structure of the heterosexual traditional family such as single parenthood, gay rights, abortion or demands for public care services are seen as threats to the moral structure of society.”⁴⁶ Moreover, legal and political discourse has excluded such matters as “women’s economic dependency on men, their unequal position in society, forms of patriarchal oppression ranging from sexual harassment to control of the body and their conduct.”⁴⁷ Instead of these, the hegemonic discourse is built upon such statements by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President, previously Prime Minister: “You cannot put women and men on an equal footing; it is against nature;”⁴⁸ “You [feminists] have nothing to do with our religion or our civilisation. We are looking up for the call of the lover of the lovers [the Prophet]. He tells us that ‘God has entrusted women to men; take care of such trust’ and do not harm them;”⁴⁹ “I see abortion as murder;”⁵⁰ “one or two [children] is not enough. To make our nation stronger, we need a more dynamic and younger population.”⁵¹

Anti-intellectualism as Populist Anti-elitism

⁴⁰ At the same time, this tension illustrates the relationship between the anti-intellectualism of the right in Turkey and the perception of modernisation in that political tradition. The right in Turkey, and the AKP also, is characterised by an understanding of modernisation without Western values and the lifestyle of the so-called elites.

⁴¹ Güneş-Ayata, Ayşe and Gökten Doğangün. 2017. Gender Politics of the AKP: Restoration of a Religio-conservative Gender Climate. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19(6), 610-27, 611.

⁴² Ayşe and Doğangün, *Gender Politics of the AKP*, 611.

⁴³ Dilek, Cindoğlu and Didem Ünal. 2016. Gender and Sexuality in the Authoritarian Discursive Strategies of ‘New Turkey’. *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 24(1), 39-54, 43.

⁴⁴ Yılmaz, Zafer. 2015. Strengthening the Family’ Policies in Turkey: Managing the Social Question and Armoring Conservative-Neoliberal Populism. *Turkish Studies* 16(3), 371-90.

⁴⁵ Altunok, Gülbanu. 2016. Neo-conservatism, Sovereign Power and Bio-power: Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Turkey. *Research and Policy on Turkey* 1(2), 132-46.

⁴⁶ Gülbanu, *Neo-conservatism, Sovereign Power and Bio-power*, 139.

⁴⁷ Gülbanu, *Neo-conservatism, Sovereign Power and Bio-power*, 139.

⁴⁸ N.N. 2014. Turkey president Erdogan: Women are not equal to men. *BBC*, 24. November (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁴⁹ *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19. February 2015.

⁵⁰ N.N. 2012. Abortion sparks raging debate in Turkey. *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28. May 2012 (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁵¹ N.N. 2014. Bianet. 22. December (accessed 31. October 2018).

In Rigney's categorisation, anti-intellectualism as populist anti-elitism manifests itself as i) devaluation of "book learning," ii) devaluation of high academic standards, iii) advocating common people's interests, and iv) attacks on intellectuals. Bitterly enough, the first case in point is the Peace Academics (*Barış Akademisyenleri*). In January 2016 1,128 academics from 89 universities in Turkey and over 355 academics and researchers from abroad signed a text titled "We will not be party to this crime" calling on the Turkish government to end state violence and prepare negotiation conditions for the solution of the Kurdish issue; and they were targeted harshly by Erdoğan:

*"Some people who call themselves academics defame Turkey for protecting its land and threaten the people in the region. They invite foreign observers to Turkey. This is nothing but colonialism...You are full of darkness. You are not intellectuals at all. You are so ignorant that you don't even know the directions to the east and here. However, we know the directions to our home very well. Turkey is not accountable to these people who call themselves academics. We are only accountable to our nation."*⁵²

There are many other striking examples of anti-intellectualism as populist anti-elitism.⁵³ One may cite such incidents as the appointment of the popular theologian Nihat Hatipoğlu as a member of the Higher Education Council⁵⁴; President Erdoğan's shows aggression against those whom he names "mankurt," meaning, according to the Turkish Language Institution, those who have broken away from their national identity and become alienated from their people, saying "we are distressed by the academicians who are alienating themselves from their own people in a constant effort to pin the government against the wall on the issues of terror" (targeting the academicians who were harshly critical of the government's responsibility in causing an increase in terrorist attacks);⁵⁵ as well as Erdoğan's use of the term "mon cher" – a derogatory term used in Turkey to describe elitists, saying "they are mon chers but we are servants."⁵⁶ A particularly perplexing example is that of a professor and vice-president of a state university when he stated: "I'd rather trust the understanding of the ignorant people who did not even attend primary school or university. I see nightmares now that the literacy rate [in Turkey] is rising.

⁵² Beyza, Kural. 2016. Academics: We Will Not be a Party to This Crime. *Bianet*, 11. January (accessed: 31. October 2018).

⁵³ For an analysis of the relationship between anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism in the Turkish context from a completely different perspective, see Gürpınar, Doğan. 2013. The Reinvention of Kemalism: Between Elitism, Anti-Elitism and Anti-Intellectualism. *Middle Eastern Studies* 49(3), 454-76; the author argues that Kemalism underwent a transition in the 2000s – so much so that it took the form of an anti-intellectual and anti-elitist elitism. This weird combination was the result of social, economic, political and cultural changes that took place after the AKP came to power in 2002. He claims that as a response to AKP's liberal economic policies, its orientation towards the European Union, the United States and the West in general, a certain segment in society endorsed a neo-Kemalism that was "anti-western, anti-liberal, and extremely xenophobic," displaying authoritarian tendencies and a hard-line demagogic/populist nationalism, degrading and excluding all others who disagreed with them. In this sense, he argues it was an elitism composed of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism.

⁵⁴ N.N. 2017. Nihat Hatipoğlu YÖK üyeliğine atandı. *Yeni Şafak*, 11. March (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁵⁵ N.N. 2015. Erdoğan'dan 'Mankurt' çıkışı. *BBCturkce*, 19. October 2015 (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁵⁶ N.N. 2014. Erdogan Ridicules 'Mon Cher' Rival at Election Rally. *Alarabiya*, 06. July (accessed: 30. October 2018).

Those who will keep the country up and running are the ignorant people. The most dangerous folks, starting with the professors, are the university graduates. Those who can best analyse events are primary school graduates.”⁵⁷ Ironically enough, immediately after this incident he was appointed as the member of the Supervisory Board of Higher Education Council.⁵⁸

There are also highly ironic examples of populist anti-elitism. One such incident was when Science, Industry and Technology Minister Fikri Işık told reporters that a phone call recording allegedly taking place between the prime minister and his son about how to “eliminate” a large amount of money that it is possible to see that the recordings are “montaged,” even without a technical examination. He said “I *felt* this was a clear montage as soon as I listened to them [the recordings]... It is clearly a montage ... We could say that without any technical examination.”⁵⁹ Another case was when the Minister responsible for communications, Binali Yıldırım [currently prime minister] gave a speech at a Türk Telekom event. In his speech, he claimed “There’s this thing called the cloud system. Everyone throws something into it and people take what they need. This is how I understand it, maybe it’s something different.” He also claimed that users would “lose their minds” if they used it too often.⁶⁰ Another curious case was the award-winning project at the Science Fair, which was organised by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey; because it was a project by an *İmam Hatip* High School student on the impact of listening to the Quran on the growth of plants.⁶¹

Anti-intellectualism as Unreflective Instrumentalism

How can one translate the AKP’s over-emphasis on the construction⁶² and transportation sectors, and its irritating boasting about the increase in the number of houses built, the increase in the number of vehicles on the road, the increase in the length of the highways built,⁶³ if not as signs of unreflective instrumentalism and keenness on practicality and *impatience with impracticality*?

How can we understand, if not as *uneasiness with autonomous educational institutions*, the fact that the rules and regulations of the education system have changed so often since 2002 that no one in the country graduated within the same scheme as they started their education? How about the fact that there has been a ban even on Wikipedia in the country for almost a year as of February 2018?

⁵⁷ N.N. [Turkish Seat of Learning – the 21st Century Version](#). *Hurriyetdailynews*, n.d. (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁵⁸ N.N. 2016. ‘[Olay profesör’ Bülent Arı’ya yeni görev](#). *Sözcü*, 30. October (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁵⁹ N.N. 2014. [Turkish Gov’t, Opposition Clash Over Accuracy of Tapes](#). *Hurriyetdailynews*, 36. February (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁶⁰ [Bianet](#).

⁶¹ N.N. 2013. [Kur'an dinletilen bitki 3 kat fazla büyüdü](#). *Haber7*, 22. May (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁶² N.N. 2017. [Kayseri Haberi: Türkiye ekonomisini inşaat sektörü sürüklüyor](#). *Sözcü*, 11. January (accessed: 30. October 2018).

⁶³ See [here](#).

All of the examples above are clear manifestations of anti-intellectualism in all its versions, as described above: They are explicit expressions of religious anti-rationalism, populist anti-elitism and unreflective instrumentalism. What we have here is a hegemonic discourse characterised by a disturbing level of devaluation of intellectual activity of any kind which contributes to the consolidation of the widespread disbelief in the importance of questioning and criticising the world we live in, imagining an ideal one and trying to reach it. This, in turn, is a major source not only of despair and discouragement but also intimidation for many in the country who believe in the significance of thinking, critiquing and imagining.

Consequently, the above analysis shows the political use of anti-intellectualism in Turkey with the purpose of consolidating and/or re-installing the current hegemony through consolidation and/or re-installation of collective identities of us versus them.⁶⁴ Within the current form of the hegemonic discourse “us” refers to those who comply with the values and principles of neoliberal conservative hegemony and with the “sociopolitical conservatism through Islamisation” where “the mainstream political discourse and the social policies are dominated by and legitimised through the privileging of Turkish-Muslim identity.”⁶⁵ “Them,” in turn, is used to denote all others who question this privileging. As an upshot of all these, then, the “us” in the hegemonic discourse comprises, for instance, those who are content with letting their educational lives be determined primarily by religious teachings, those who privilege the so-called wisdom of the uneducated over that of academicians, intellectuals and diplomats, those who believe that women should live their lives in accordance with the social norms associated with motherhood and wifery rather than on the feminist claims that challenge the traditional gender hierarchy. It is in this sense, as I said before, anti-intellectualism is the main component of the latest version of populism *alla turca*.

Conclusion

Two tasks seem to be necessary to challenge and disarticulate the current order. The first is to put it under the spotlight and decipher the dichotomy it has established between “us” and “them” while structuring the floating signifiers into a unified field. The second is seeking the ways of doing the same. Although not sufficient by itself, the first is a prerequisite of the second. This is the major reason why this article aims to make a contribution in that sense, so that it may shed light on the thinking about alternatives. It exceeds the purpose of this study to elaborate on the possible ways of installing a counter-hegemony. It may suffice to stress that there is a need to establish a “chain of

⁶⁴ The political use of anti-intellectualism has many examples in contexts other than Turkey. For instance, Shogan examines anti-intellectualism in the American political life from this point of view and shows how three Republican presidents – Eisenhower, Reagan and Bush – used anti-intellectualism strategically “to tell the story that [they] *wanted* to tell.” A more recent example would be the hardline right-winger Viktor Orban of Hungary. Having been re-elected for a third successive term as prime minister in April 2018, he said the main task of his new government will be to preserve Hungary’s security and Christian culture. As a way of consolidating his exclusionary policies he chose to wage a war against the Central European University.

⁶⁵ Coşar, Simten and İnci Özkan Kerestecioğlu. 2017. Feminist Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Neoliberal Attacks, Feminist Claims to the Public. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38(2), 151-74.

equivalence” among the particularities which both exclude and are excluded by the current hegemony. In these respects, they are equal. As mentioned above, although social actors occupy differential positions within the discourses that constitute the social fabric, *vis-à-vis* oppressive forces a set of particularities can establish relations of equivalence between themselves. This is what seems to be missing among dissident movements and opposition parties in Turkey. They are reluctant to draw an external boundary between themselves and the hegemonic constellation; to define an “us” as opposed to “them,” thereby creating a collective identity. The major reason for this seems to be the lack of a thorough understanding of the (changing) dynamics of the installation, consolidation, re-installation of hegemony. The analysis in this paper would like to contribute any reflection on that point.

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