

The Left, Liberalism and Cynicism

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The Ergenekon Trial, left-cynicism and liberal counter-cynicism¹

The Ergenekon trial sparked a fiery quarrel unrevealing a resentment almost equivalent to that released by the Ergenekon community, in other words, the irregular war machinery of the state, extra-judicial networks and organized crime gangs.²

First, we should indicate without hesitation that from the standpoint of socialism and the left in its broadest sense, it is completely unacceptable to trivialize the Ergenekon trial, and doing so is a typical instance of one of the structural problems of the left, namely that of *cynicism*.³ As such, this gesture stands as a dividing line within the left as well as in the larger network of social relations. It is true that the trial in its current form reveals only the tip of the iceberg that culminate some of the founding elements of the “state tradition” in Turkey: the irregular war machinery and extra-judicial relations devised for provocation... It is also true that the trial sweeps under the rug the horrifying consequences of the 70 year-long history of this network operating in the East of the Euphrates River in Turkey; limits the prosecution to the personnel who have already fallen out of grace within the establishment; and dilutes the process by extending it to some rather insignificant individuals and especially political opponents of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), thus concealing the structural mechanism that belie this organization and its *mode of thinking*. Nevertheless, it is of no small gain that the existence of such an establishment has been acknowledged publicly and the fact that (in the language of the former President of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel) “such businesses” constitute criminal offences has been officially recognized. The detainment of a group of individuals who have come to poison life in Turkey with the provocations they have devised and executed, with the murders they have ordered and the racist language they have reaped and sown in Turkey, and the restriction of their freedoms and “activities” – albeit temporarily – is at least alleviating, if nothing else.

Naturally the left cannot be expected to turn a blind eye to the incompleteness of this trial, the calculating approach it is carried out with and the limits set by unspoken lines drawn by its political and stately character. Similarly, the left cannot overlook the fact that the Ergenekon trial “exploded” due to a scramble for power within the ruling classes/the system/the regime. But what exactly constitutes our motivation for seeing this? Why “see everything”? Is it in order to expose the structural decay of the system and lay bare the opportunism of the government/AKP? Or, is it to claim “it is obvious where all this is leading to within the established order,” and to label the process as “a battle of elephants,” while lying comfortably in our chairs? This is cynicism; it is a conformism with tragic consequences and constitutes an outright anti-political stance.⁴

In respond to this trial, the reflex of the left should not be limited to an exhibitionism defined by cynicism, taking on a sterile “political stance” completely preoccupied with suspicions – certainly not unfounded – about the instrumentalisation of the Ergenekon trial. Instead, the left should insist on the process to lay bare the roots and to inquire a confrontation with the underlying thought mechanisms of this establishment. A left that devotes its energies to the pursuit and materialization of the results of such an inquiry (both within the political and legal realms) would be capable of transforming its *ethical* stance to *political* action, which is already premised by its own ethics.

¹ This text was translated from the original published in *Birikim* 234 (October 2008). We would like to thank Tanil Bora and *Birikim* for giving us the permission to publish it again.

² Behçet Çelik makes a similar claim in his article titled “Buzdağının dibi”, published in *Virgül* 122 (September 2008), p. 57.

³ I have been discussing the issue of cynicism in the left for some time now: “12 Eylül Bozgununun Sürekliliği: Sol ve Sinizm”, *Birikim* 198 (October 2005), p. 43-50 and “İki Sinizm, İki Pragmatizm – eylemi yeniden düşünmek”, *Birikim* 210 (October 2006), p. 16-23.

⁴ Jacques Rancière claims that in the aftermath of the 1830 revolution in Paris, the workers on strike did not strive to reveal that given the material conditions, the promises of liberalism regarding political and legal equality are “in vain” (illusions), but instead they were concentrated on demanding that this discrepancy between the promise and the actual material conditions be overcome. (*Siyasalin Kıyısında [On the Shores of Politics]*, trans. Aziz Ufuk Kılıç, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul 2007, p.55-57.)

Luckily, there exists a left in pursuit of such a goal. Many leftist intellectuals, public figures, left circles, organisations and political parties are hanging on, as much as they can, to the already parted veil of the Ergenekon establishment. For example, it is worth noting that *Ezilenlerin Sosyalist Platformu* [Socialist Platform of the Oppressed] famous for its sterile radicalism, is leading a campaign in this direction. Similarly, we have seen that even in the daily newspaper *BirGün* which has presented an extreme example of cynicism with their headline running “Go at One Another” and therefore has come to be recognized as the embodiment of this cynical attitude, there are columnists concerned with laying bare the “truth” of Ergenekon and we have seen headlines in the newspaper in this direction.⁵

Yes, there is a sound basis for the existence of cynicism in the leftist community, but the left is not solely comprised of cynicism. And yes, this is a fundamental criterion of differentiation, but if differentiation stands for clearly distinguishing one thing from the other, one should carefully refrain from sweeping generalizations in the process. When we consider the example of *BirGün* in this regard, we should state that any labelling that does not consider the inner division and debates in this ground/environment becomes not only unjust, but it will also hinder the process of political and intellectual crystallization. It is true that the cynicism within the left has hindered the possibility of intervening with the events of the time with a clearer voice; yet it is also true that designating a significant amount of one’s resources (and for certain people their utmost capabilities) to the exposition of this cynicism, and finding here an opportunity to slander the left, helps muddy the waters of the urgency of daily events. As such, those gestures are themselves nothing other than cynicism.

We have touched upon the cynicism of the left and the counter cynicism against the left. This debate has often been labelled as one between leftists and liberals. Leaving the work of looking beneath label(s) for the later parts of this paper, let us move on to the indications of this debate between leftist and liberals. The first question is: What is the source of this wrath and anger? To what do we owe all this steam?

The anger of liberal public figures, the anger on the left

Years ago, Can Kozanoğlu resorted to the definition “irritable liberals.” He felt obliged to coin this phrase to refer to the authoritarian attitude of a section of liberal public figures – who were only recently becoming popular at the time – that did not really comply with the doctrines of freedom and tolerance they were advocating. To be sure, most liberal public figures in Turkey – whether they are in support of this liberal line openly, ostensibly or by implication – are prone to adopt in their discourses the very attitudes that they love to question, namely that of “positivist social engineering” and of authoritarian Kemalism, and thus are inclined to speak with “contempt.”⁶ This is a local contribution to what we can call the “universal” stylistic characteristics of the liberal attitude (I refrain from saying this attitude is “unique to us,” since one can observe it in different places around the world⁷, but here it retains a distinct taste). These “universal” stylistic characters of liberalism which render it so repugnant are bound with cynicism (exemplified to me suitably via oft-used phrases such as “that is your problem,” or “I cannot do anything about that”); this carefree language specifically irritates the left in its encounters with liberalism. There is plenty of this in “Turkish Liberalism”; the conceited and magisterial attitude I referred to earlier

⁵ The articles of Mithat Sancar in *BirGün* newspaper are strong examples to this kind of pursuit and the multi-dimensional analysis of these issues. See especially the articles on July 7th, July 14th, July 18th, July 28th, August 26th 2008. The articles can be retrieved at: http://www.birgun.net/writer_2008_index.php.

⁶ One fresh example of this liberal attitude is the designation of talks about the state terror on May 1 or the *Tuzla* murders as attempts to put the government on the spot in its fight against the status quo, or even as attempts that try to cover up the Ergenekon trial. In Ümit Kivanç’s definition: “being a democratic policeman.” *Taraf*, 21 June 2008.

⁷ Those who criticize liberalism from within criticize the liberal discourse for its “rigidity and intolerance,” its “display of wrath against civil society,” its “desire for a universally commanding and authoritarian voice,” its “pride.” See John Gray, *Post-Liberalism* [Post-Liberalism], trans. Müfit Günay, Dost Kitabevi Yayınları, Ankara 2004, p. 267 etc., 337 etc.

and furthermore a distinct fervour to slander the left.⁸ The topic of this current endeavour is specifically this fervour.

One can search for the roots of this steam of anger coming from the liberal-leaning public figures and intellectuals, in their cultivation upon the soil and greenhouses of the nationalist-conservative climate of the Cold War era. It is truly hard to spot a liberal intellectual who has been able to distance himself/herself from the fanatical anti-communism which maintained its “Free World” rhetoric focused on geo-strategy and its McCarthyism for decades from the 1940’s to the 1980’s. We cannot consider this to be a perennial genetic heritage, yet we must acknowledge that it has left a deep mark. The fact that upon being faced with any kind of criticism, one of the first words that [Ankara Mayor e.n.] İ. Melih Gökçek and [Prime Minister e.n.] R. Tayyip Erdoğan have recourse to is the labelling notion of “communist tactics,” testifies to the longevity and permanence of anti-communism in this country’s political culture. Granted, the new liberal intellectuals of the post-Cold War era did not refrain from questioning their old anti-communist habits, their indoctrination, and their obsessions. Specifically, certain members of the Association of Liberal Thinking who were reared by one of the vocational schools of anti-communism in Turkey, namely the *Yeni Forum* magazine, produced a clear self-critique on the utilization of “the threat of communism” as a means of perpetually restricting freedoms. Even so, we can claim that the ideological utility of anti-communism has come to an end; yet the confusion and the anger that it perpetuates is still in good use. It lingers on, evolving into a type of sarcasm at certain instances. Another constant employed by intellectuals that have come to lean towards liberalism from nationalist-conservatism (including the constituents of Islamism that consider themselves to be part of the same group) or intellectuals who seek a synthesis between conservatism and liberalism, is “localism.” This discourse, which demotes liberal democratism into an authentic representation of the local/national, is always ready to criminalize the left, which it stigmatizes as foreign/ness.

Ultimately, the group of liberal public figures with their roots in nationalism-conservatism, were viewing the left from a distance. However, the group of liberals whose roots are in the left and who have gained a voice after the mid-1980’s, have had a more sustained settling of scores with the left, as expected. Perhaps, we should talk about an attitude that sought an unproblematic severance of ties over and above an actual settling of scores. In many instances we can observe that the mentality structures that were once espoused by the left/socialism have enslaved these groups. This is an enslavement that begets either a trite repetitiveness or reactionism. Those who “knew” it as a mechanical-positivist automatism, a dogmatic guide or an authoritarian language, desired to demote socialism to a caricature and to trample on it in order to get rid of it. Even if there was any liberal critical voice – or the possibility of culminating one – that tried to contribute to a genuine and serious reckoning with this damned historical heritage of socialism and its serious paradoxes, it was impossible to hear it amidst the ongoing hassle. This impulsive and reactionary attitude was followed up by a repetition of the very same mentality structures, albeit with a little bit of reparation. Among them, we can count a shift towards an economist and technologist determinism especially in the context of the process of globalisation while making a mockery of the social engineering and determinism of the left... Or, sustaining the fanaticism and demagoguery of the pro-“Aydınlıkçı”⁹ attitude within a liberal context.

In trying to understand the furore of the “Turkish liberals” we should consider their approving attitude towards and their engagement with the Motherland Party (ANAP) and AKP governments, whether in the context of the self-articulation of the trajectory of the New-Right in the globalisation process, or opposing the status quo in Turkey [t.n. Kemalism] (undoubtedly in proportion to the existence and extent of such an engagement). An indirect “responsibility” for power ossifies attitudes even if it belies consistency. The crown ennobles as it renders its holder irascible!

⁸ In his multi-dimensional interview on the debate between the left and liberalism, Şükrü Argın also raises his eyebrows to this “curious” fervor: “Sol, kendi adına konuşmalı,” *Mesele*, September 2008, p. 26-35.

⁹ A leftist movement established in the late 1960s. The group’s Maoist sympathies had an impact on revolutionary groups in the late 1970s. In the late 1980s some of its members became defenders of political and/or economic liberalism whereas its core leadership intensified the nationalist tone and adopted a radical Kemalism. (e.n.)

Let us not limit ourselves to a talk over people with designations such as “Ex-...” or “of-...-origin,” for the species of liberal intellectuals (or half-intellectuals) have come to find larger breeding grounds than their seedbeds in the corners of the leftist and nationalist-conservative milieus. This change is related to the changes in the cultural climate of the middle classes. Among the younger generations of the urban and educated middle class, there exists a section that is as distanced from the pedantism of official ideology and its adherent political culture as it is from the heroic narratives of the nationalist-conservatives. Equipped with a wit that is sharpened through their constant entertaining encounter with popular culture and culture of consumption, they are bent towards a libertine attitude. They are distanced from the awe expressed in the oft used phrase “We/our country that don’t/doesn’t resemble any other,” and even a little sarcastic about this locality as they are open to the rest of the globe. One way or another, this social profile has been under the influence of the left, both culturally and politically, for the last decades. They have viewed the left with a certain interest, remaining sympathetic or at least in goodwill. Now, as they cease to be a relatively small group and begin growing in numbers, the left becomes an object of their prudence. Why?... Because of the *Zeitgeist*... Because of the left’s stiffness, because the left lost its charm after its gestures for revival failed at the end of the 1980’s and the 1990’s... Together with these, deep down because of the conformism of the middle classes... After all, in the eyes of the social profile¹⁰ that we have been describing, the left has become a bore! It does not need to be an indoctrinating liberalism; an attitude we can call liberal disposition, a sort of “everyday/ordinary liberalism” is more suitable for this group.

This social profile, expanding among the younger generations of the middle class, gives birth to a new group of liberal intellectuals, or to be more precise, it becomes the ground upon which this new group can grow. I presume we can include the three-year-old activist initiative Young Civilians in this group – not as the sole representative of the new liberal intellectual public figure, but as an example, an extension, a symptom of it.¹¹ The desire that this group of intellectuals have invested in their scuffle with the left can be related to an effort to create a break inside this social profile: it can be explained as an effort that tries to separate the libertine attitude that exists within the middle classes from leftist sympathies, leftist reiterations and left-cynicism. There also exists a dimension of competition to this. A new group of intellectuals is trying to gain ground and that ground exists virtually within the territory that is in the possession of the left.

This is the profit that this new liberal group of individuals reap from their scuffle with the left, the social and political logic behind their designating the left as their primary opponent. But what about the hostile reaction of the left to the “liberal intellectuals”? Why would the “liberals” be deemed the worst of demons with the ugliest faces? Is this only a reaction against the merciless attacks coming from the liberal intellectuals (be they of leftist or of conservative origin)? Or does it indicate a determination to take the opportunity to expose the “real/ugly” face of liberalism, or, in relation to this, an effort to hinder the increasing influence of liberalism along the leftist ranks?

These ways of explanation should be taken as warnings advising us to think about the middle class existence/appearance of the left/being leftist, or about the fact that the left/being leftist has been increasingly confined in the middle classes. The growth of a tendency we can call “daily/ordinary liberalism” – that could also transform itself to an able liberal discourse – among the middle classes would “upset” the left, for this would indicate a partial loss of the territory that is in possession of the left. If we are to make sense of the level of aggression in the reaction against the “liberal intellectuals,” we should seek the share of the anxiety stemming from the

¹⁰ It is possible to support and enrich this profile with Ali Şimşek’s depictions and comments in his book *Yeni Orta Sınıf* (L&M Yayınları, İstanbul 2005). In this book Ali Şimşek writes about the cynicism of the new middle class that moves from preparing a guide to everything and having explicated everything to derive an attitude that sees everything to be in vain.

¹¹ It would be misleading to seek a one-to-one correspondence in poise and behavior between the roughly depicted new middle class profile and this new group of intellectuals (and specifically the Young Civilians). The initiative of the new liberal public figures is oriented towards politicizing this conformist and cynical “base.” Furthermore, we should note that among the Young Civilians there are attempts to settle scores with the nationalist-conservative tradition aside from the tendency to make fun of the left.

competition over an already (restricted) space, when the left and its structures of public opinion have been squeezed into the middle classes. This is why a *discussion* is taking place, even though at times it becomes ugly and thus (rendered) impossible to sustain. It is obvious that in this case, as opposed to speaking to a “Neo-Fascist,” or to a self-declared supporter of Ergenekon, or to a radical Islamist terrorist, you are speaking to your opponent considering the possibility of convincing third parties, comprised mostly of a crowd of “confused individuals,” and even your opponent herself!

I certainly do not think that becoming middle class or being in contact with the middle classes are signs of degeneration. It is indeed a disgrace for left that takes itself seriously if its horizon of influence is limited to the middle classes, if it is unable to touch upon the “bottom of the ladder,” upon the subaltern, if it turns a blind eye to them especially given the current extent of polarization between the poor and the rich that makes one seek the most naive form of social justice around. Yet, from this juncture we should not waver into a language that is a “childhood disease,” one that preaches purification and obtaining a clear-cut class line, and tries to cover up its political shortcomings by recourse to a moralist fanaticism. The socialist left has always been attached to the middle class (in the old terminology “the petit bourgeois”), be it through its cadres or its voluntaristic/progressive attitude, or through its populist strategies that included them in the context of the classes that constituted the public in general. More importantly, in an era of the expanding reproduction of capitalism when commodification finds its way to all compartments of life, not only do social contradictions, especially reification/alienation (within the context of the production of non-material commodities) keep on injuring and agitating the middle classes, but also crystallize a very productive contradiction for socialism (for it is a contradiction that provokes to envision a new society/societal-order). The diffusion of the social contradictions of capitalism in the middle classes is becoming an organic process. In short, today the left can neither sever its ties with the subaltern, nor disregard the middle classes. With a perspective that acknowledges the possible inadequacy of the “labour oriented struggle” formula and with a horizon that goes beyond the puritanism of purging the middle classes of the middle class ideology, the left should embrace the principle of equality and find a way to address “humans” and “humanity.”¹²

But this is not our topic, and our resources here will not be sufficient to cover it. We can take on an easier approach... Are we going to consider the slow distancing from the left of bright kids from good families, educated in good schools, and their courting of liberal tendencies, as a class dependent “natural event” and remain at ease, or are we going to view it as the decay of the intellectual enamel of the left and worry?

Let us put these questions in our pocket and continue the analysis of the “problematic” of anti-liberalism within the left

The seductive nature of anti-liberalism

One should be able to discern between slander and critique. One stands against slander, refuses it, reacts to it and passes one’s judgment on the person responsible for it; yet upon sensing the existence of even a slight amount of critique, one should carefully consider the statement, taking it in earnest without seeking a commensurability (exemplified by the words “if you look it that way, then ...”), without giving way to any inferiority complex. This must be the defining “characteristic” of the left. And is not this exactly what distinguishes the left, the leftist ethics? It is capacity to turn around and look back at itself... For example, when Etyen Mahçupyan and other liberal columnists detect racist-nationalist symptoms within the *Birgün* newspaper circle and therefore in the “left,” it becomes imperative to question the validity of the case, to react against the indiscriminate language of slander, and to deny any “allegation” that claims that the ultimate culprit of racism in Turkey is the left (by way of its relation with Kemalism). On the other

¹² Here I am simply repeating Şükrü Argın's call: “Pan-kapitalizm çağında siyasetin buharlaşması,” *Mesele*, April 2008, p. 37-40.

hand, even if the allegations carry only a grain of truth, it is our responsibility to problematize the really existing nationalist prejudices and modes of thinking – which truly exist within the socialist left. One should never forget that upon the ground of political ethics, the trials that the left goes through are harsher; as in the example of the racist-nationalist discourse, a tendency that does not constitute a real problem inside the thought climate of the right is problematic from the perspective of the left. There should be no stains on the white! Other stuff might rot, salt should not!

For a long time now, the name and adjective “liberal” is used as a derogatory term within a large spectrum of the left and this tendency reaches such a level that it presents “liberal intellectuals” as worse calamities than torturers with blood-stained hands, or even murderers.

Especially when it is extended to leftist, socialist intellectuals who do not prefer to define themselves as liberals, the intention to insult becomes clear, and if it is not an insult, it harbours a quality that instigates an “otherness.” Obviously, it is necessary and important to delineate the socialist left from liberals and to explicate the difference. Yet, is not there a bit too much of a fanfare for anti-liberalism within the left, a fanfare that goes farther than the intention to designate the difference? The waters that lie ahead of falling prey to the seduction of anti-liberalism are dangerous. It is not in vain that fascism conceives of socialism and liberalism as of the same origin; for the charges that are being utilized in slandering liberalism, such as “foreign,” “of Western origin,” “materialistic,” “distant to spiritual values,” “cosmopolitan,” “intellectualist,” are the very same indulgences that the left is charged with. It is possible that a left who has gone into a frenzy on anti-liberalism will start using such motifs, and this is not a rare sight. I am not going into the complacent consent over the usage of cuss words like “liboş” and “entel” [derogatory terms for liberal and intellectual, respectively e.n.], which are blatantly sexist.

In short, it is not a good sign if “being liberal” is easily degraded into an insult, not only because it will lead us to the aforementioned dangerous waters, but it is problematic because it hinders the modes in which socialism could take up its “problem” with liberalism in earnest.

Liberalism and socialism: what sort of adversaries?¹³

I would like to mention one point Ömer Laçiner reminded us in the last issue of *Birikim*¹⁴, namely, *the shared roots between liberalism and Marxism-Socialism and the dialectical relationship between them*. Socialism became a distinct political current and movement through the course of the 1848 revolutions. Marx came to his own thinking by way of liberalism through a questioning and critique of it, overcoming it. Here overcoming comes to mean, through a recourse to one of Marx' favourite Hegelian terms, “*aufheben*,” that is, overcoming via inclusion/preservation. Specifically for Marx' socialism, the critique of liberalism is of *founding value*. This implies that the critique of liberalism is immanent to and contiguous with socialism. That is, it is not a job finished by the “great masters” when they realized this grand idea and political break; it is a critique, a defiance, which should be renewed with each passing generation and the historical changes and political experiences that accompany them. This is not only to remain alert against liberalism, nor is it to be inoculated to become immune to its perils. It is to venture out into the open to grow stronger at the risk of coughing and sneezing. If socialism is a diamond, this is the way it will be chiselled.

We mentioned shared roots. We might as well call it a shared space, which is none other than the simple and grand problematic of rights and liberties. Liberalism bases itself upon the notion of the *abstract* individual, promising an *abstract* set of rights and liberties. It is tied to the rights of negative freedoms. It is formalist; its conception of democracy is procedural. The abstract

¹³ Let us remember the subtlety of the concept of adversary on this occasion. One of the major adherents of the anti-global movement, Susan George, who is a “liberal-leftist” herself, prefers using the term “adversaries” since she finds the concept of rival to be “too sportsmanly” and the concept of enemy gives rise only to the thought of an absolute victory and the annihilation of the opposing side, which is above all impossible. To her, the struggle against adversaries require “knowledge, political judo and long-term engagement.” Susan George, *Başka Bir Dünya Mümkün, Eğer...*, tr. Ali Tonak, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul 2005, p. 86-7. [Susan George, *Another World Is Possible, If...*, Verso, New York, 2004, p.89.]

¹⁴ Ömer Laçiner, “Yolun sonu/başlangıcı,” *Birikim* 232/233 (August-September 2008), p. 20-21.

individual, that we mentioned above, is where both the strength and the shortcomings of liberalism are located. To attribute value and to hand rights to people regardless of their material conditions, adjectives, and the state they are in, is a mighty and “noble” ideal. Yet, when conditions, material resources, social obstacles and inequalities do not allow concrete individuals to use their abstract rights, this promise of rights and liberties gets transformed into cynicism. The contradiction between abstract liberties and their concrete impossibility is the centrepiece of the conflict between liberalism and socialism. At this point, liberalism, in as much as it could appropriate the defiance of socialism, acknowledges this contradiction and tries to cope with it. A liberalism that is unable to venture against this defiance or one that overlooks it (or rather one that is “relaxed” about and “liberated” from it to the point of disregarding it completely); is transformed into *ultra-liberalism*¹⁵, an absolute and ugly cynicism; and in the final analysis, it is reduced to a utility for legitimizing capitalism. At the extreme end is neo-liberalism, which is liberalism transformed into something beyond cynicism, into a dark sarcasm that has no “opinions” or ethics beyond the *metaphor of the market*.

Socialism differentiates itself from liberalism by questioning why everyone is equal but some are more equal than others, and by preoccupying itself with the positive content of rights and liberties and the material-objective conditions of their realization. Looking at the material conditions and concentrating upon the “path to be taken” allows socialism to overcome via inclusion not only the principles of liberalism but its goals as well. The socialist conception of freedom is beyond the liberal conception that is based on liberty bereft of any coercion or necessity; it opens up to a horizon, is full of active participation, execution and creation. It does not allow democracy to be consumed on a structural-procedural plane; democracy does stand for the means/premise/principle of freedom, but it cannot be a substitute for the project or utopia of emancipation.

It is true that socialism can also “benefit” from the liberal critique. Liberal critique stands as a warning against the risk of the transformation of materialism and administrative interventions in humanitarian processes into a positivist and patrimonious-protective attitude – and we know from the history of socialism that this is a plausible risk. The possibility of a drift from a cynicism directed against an understanding of freedom that is based on the abstract-individual, to an overall cynicism of rights and liberties, retains its power; giving up the “discussion” with liberalism would give more momentum to this drift. It could be said that socialism does not need liberalism to come up with this self-critique. This might be true, but it is true as long as socialism holds on to the conscious effort of overcoming liberalism via an inclusion of it. For this reason, people who were attentive to and sensitive about maintaining this critique during the experiences of “one-country socialism” and real socialism were the “liberal leftists/socialists” of the time; or to put it more accurately, they were suspected of having “liberal-left” tendencies and were chased away.

In short, an anti-liberalism that merely accuses liberalism, does not give a genuine *discussion* with liberalism its due, renders the left inept and only suffices to cover its own wounds.

Left-liberal, liberal-left

As it seems fit now, we need to underline the fact that it is imperative to differentiate the noun and adjective forms of the terms “left” and “liberal” in compound phrases. I believe making this distinction has a political, conceptual and strategic “significance.” Left-liberals are liberals who are relatively susceptible to the issues of equality and social justice. Liberal-leftists, however, are bound to the problematic of negative rights and liberties with passion, they are leftists whose engagement with socialism and social-democracy is registered through these notions. If we are to utilize a familial metaphor, we can say that for ‘pure’ socialists/leftists, or more precisely for leftists who are in search of such purity (this might as well be a type of “abstract individual”!),

¹⁵ Francisco Vergara, *Liberalizmin Felsefi Temelleri*, trans. Bülent Arıbaş, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2006, p. 166-189.

liberal-leftists are siblings, (some as soul-mates, others with certain discord); left-liberals, however, are cousins and nephews/nieces (some of first degree, others of third).

We should not forget that the political thought of the liberal-left has a deep-rooted tradition. For some people its roots reach all the way to John Stuart Mill (whom I prefer to situate as *left-liberal*) and then continuously bifurcate to its prime-adherents such as John Dewey, Bernhard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, C. B. Macpherson all the way to Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (whom I would also like to designate as left-liberal) and becoming a delta which gets nourished by many different sources. We can include within this family post liberalism¹⁶, which holds that the well-being of human beings and the objective structure of the polyvalence of human society remains at odds with the fundamental principles of liberalism (individualism, equality [in the eyes of the law], universality, optimism), insisting that it is impossible to design a society based on rights, and furthermore that the ideology of liberalism corrupts the principle values of liberalism, and that the only remaining concrete premise of the political philosophy of liberalism is civil society (one that is pluralist, secures the basics of freedom, and thus restricts governments).

The burlesque article that Perry Anderson wrote on the political adventure of the Italian thinker Norberto Bobbio¹⁷ is the proper food for thought on the constraints and horizon of liberal-left thought!¹⁸ Under the specific conditions of Italy which were determined by fascism, the anti-fascist resistance and the democratic struggles of the post-fascist period, Bobbio tried to come up with a “third way” (this is new!) by synthesizing the liberal and socialist traditions. I find it worthwhile to ponder on Anderson’s writings on the paradoxical status of liberalism in Italy by relating them to the situation in Turkey – not simply to claim an affinity but rather to compare the two and to think about the differences:

“The fact that the classical ideals of liberalism were simultaneously praised while they were turned into a parody allowed these ideals to retain their normative power they had lost in other places, and this allowed these ideals to become the most unexpected and adamant aspects of the opposition to the established order.” (p. 147-8)

For Bobbio, socialism is an ideal that subsumes the liberal ideal – whereas the opposite is obviously not possible (we can consider this as a distinct criterion that separates the liberal-left from left-liberalism). He refrains from giving up the gains of liberal democracy in the name of an ambiguous “dictatorship of the proletariat.” He considers liberal institutions to be components of material culture – he thinks they are “neutral,” incontestable. What allows him to hold on to liberalism is the notion of natural rights and the principal importance he pays to the constitutional assurance of fundamental human rights. In the words of Anderson, “he maintains a deep commitment to constitutional government rather than a special attachment to the market.” (Ibid., p.152) Yet, even though he is repeatedly disappointed, becoming a victim of his good will, Bobbio’s eyes are not blind to the reality of the state apparatus of the bourgeois establishment. We, who live in the country of Ergenekon, comprehend well the below claim that he makes as an engaged anti-fascist from the country of the Gladio:

“The representative government has never been able to subjugate the executive government. The military, the bureaucracy and secret services are the secret elements operating beneath the surface of parliamentary democracy. Even the best constitution can only present a deceitful appearance of the grand and complex structure of the contemporary state. It does not even reveal what is hidden behind or inside this façade – let alone revealing what lies deep down.” (p. 165)

¹⁶ John Gray’s book, which I mentioned in the 6th footnote, is enlightening in this regard. (Especially the last chapter: “Liberalizmde ne öldü ne kaldı?,” p. 305-352) [“What is dead and what is living in liberalism?” p. 283-328, in the original.]

¹⁷ The book he wrote after the “fall of the bi-polar world,” is a humble yet extremely explicit answer to those declarations and statements that decried the death of ideologies and the disappearance of the distinction between the right and the left, underlining the “primordial-perennial” characteristic of these fundamental distinctions. Norberto Bobbio, *Sağ ve Sol [Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction]*, trans. Zuhâl Yılmaz, Dost Kitabevi Yayınları, Ankara 1999.

¹⁸ Perry Anderson, “Norberto Bobbio” nun Yakınlıkları” [“The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio”], in *Tarihten Siyasete Eleştiri Yazıları*, trans. Simten Coşar (ed. Elçin Gen), İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul 2003, p. 131-184.

Perry Anderson's observations on "where" capitalism stands within the thought of Bobbio are as such:

"In Bobbio's thought, besides being an unjust system of distribution, capitalism as a system of production is nothing more than a mere background that can be criticized without overdoing it – it is rejected as a whole, but can never be fully analyzed." (p. 173)

From the vantage point of socialism, this is the fundamental constraint, problem and shortcoming of the liberal-left. Accepting capitalism almost as an event of the "material culture"... Within the liberal-left, or following Bobbio's self-definition, within liberal-socialism, there does exist an ethical anti-capitalism and an overall discomfort with capitalism. Yet, either due to the disillusionment caused by defeat, or to the observation that the political conjuncture or powers seem inadequate to create an alternative to capitalism, often times because they prioritize more immediate, more burning issues, such as those pertaining to democracy and human rights, and other times because they truly regard capitalism as an event of the "material culture" (which marks the threshold between the liberal-left and left-liberalism); Bobbio, and the liberal-left in general are kept from problematizing capitalism (more precisely from politicizing this problem in contemporary contexts) and engaging with issues pertaining to class.

As is the case with every mortal soul, the swings, the holes and sometimes the inconsistencies that we can observe in Bobbio's political adventure and thought should alert us to the fact that the liberal-left, rather than being a full-fledged doctrine or a rigid *position*, is a political-conceptual *port of call*, and it should be regarded as such. A place "frequented" by thought and practice, as the discursive connotation of the concept suggests: a moment of Praxis...

The "liberal" agenda and the "left" agenda

"Liberals" and "leftists" cannot easily walk together to protest the conditions in Tuzla [docks t.n.]. (Theoretically, they might as well, but as long as the opinion of the voiced majority of this country's liberals' interest in Tuzla remains on this cynical level, as exemplified by their common outcry "if there were any proper leftists in this country, they would take an interest in Tuzla," this is very hard to accomplish in practice.) But, we also know that "liberals" and "leftists" walked together for Hrant Dink. Or, they were able to sign and continue to sign common statements related to the Kurdish issue.

From the perspective of a bookish left, the fact that the current agenda is co-opted by identity issues and issues pertaining to fundamental rights and liberties, is related to the loss of the class perspective and the ideological hegemony of liberalism. These issues are viewed as "superfluous matters that globalisation has burdened us with." We need to "pay our respects," but what we really ought to do is to change the agenda, to foreground our issues and to foreground the "principle problem" in each issue. Thankfully, together with the dogmatic left that views issues such as ethno-cultural discrimination, the erosion of the status of citizenship, the patriarchal gender regime and ecological destruction as "secondary" matters – when the archenemy capitalism is still standing high – there is another left that indeed sees the connection between them and capitalism. They also make the following distinction: On one hand, these contradictions are inherent to capitalism and belong to its constitution; capitalism re-produces itself through these contradictions. On the other hand, these contradictions which are shaped today by commodification and the process of the re-production of capital, have had a life of their own prior to capitalism; thus they possess a degree of autonomy both in relation to history, and the specificity of experience (that of appropriation, of adoption, of resistance...). These contradictions are not always/absolutely/unconditionally articulated in capitalism inside the "logic" of labour-capital. Instead, as *external factors that have become inherent*, they adhere to the labour-capital relation/contradiction through a matrix that could best be likened to the operation of addition-subtraction rather than one of multiplication-division, just as non-economical coercion and informal economies are "regulated" exceptions inside the capitalist economical system.

The way ethno-cultural, sexist, etc., modes of discrimination, inequalities, systems of domination are articulated in capitalism is not a division without a remainder, i.e. they cannot be divided by the labour-capital contradiction without a remainder. There is certainly an outstanding balance – one that is deposited to capitalism's account! “Objectively,” if these contradictions are tackled outside the matrix of capitalism one can only be preoccupied with the remainders, the outstanding balances of these contradictions and the social and political problems they give birth to. But lest we forget, sometimes it is possible to become aware of and to analyze a situation through its “extra” appearances.

We can expand this point by recourse to the oft-mentioned “Küçükömer Paradox”¹⁹ that we always come across in the context of the antagonism between the left and liberalism and in their discussions over democracy. Presenting the tyranny and patrimony of the state elite/the bureaucracy/the army/the caste of *kapikulu* as the primary axis of the democratic struggle in Turkey, is a liberal (left-liberal) position. (Presenting this as a class contradiction unique to Turkish history-society, viewing the military-civil bureaucratic elite as “the” sovereign class; this is a liberal-*left* position.) Turning a blind eye to the state’s patrimonious-authoritarian apparatuses of coercion and ideology in Turkey, or considering them to be completely appropriated by capital in the name of proving the governing laws of class contradiction is a dogmatic left position. From a different left position, it is possible to carefully consider the ways in which the tyranny of the state “tradition” and the sovereignty of capital are articulated. The fact that these forms of articulation, which are of course subjected to the “overdeterminism” of capitalism, are not fixated and never follow a straight path is a vital resource for politics, for Praxis.

It strengthens one to know that capitalism is the source of all evil; but the danger in seeing only this in all perils is that it can impel people who are trying to fight against “a” malice that is very much bone and flesh to cynicism.

Sometimes the “liberal” agenda and the “left/socialist” agenda do really clash, as in the case of the problem of *Equality*, around the notion of the *Public*, and around the idea of the *social state*. Other times, the “liberal” agenda and the “left/socialist” agenda are in contact or are prone to be in contact. There exist clear buttonholes between the demands concerning the recognition of rights, liberties and identities, and class contradictions and the issue of poverty. But, some buttons may as well remain unbuttoned. For example, if the Kurdish problem is “exaggeratedly” reduced to class-based discrimination and poverty, it can bring a leftist close to the position of Bülent Ecevit. Let us remember my invitation to think through *ports of call* rather than rigid “positions”; here, there is a liberal-left port of call – or a left-liberal *tension*.

We can observe the manifestation of this port of call or this tension in Immanuel Wallerstein's *After Liberalism*. Wallerstein holds that, after assimilating both socialism and conservatism for a century and a half, the hegemony and the paradigmatic dominance of liberalism has demised at the end of the 20th Century. Now, the crucial ingredient in political resistance and future perspective is demanding what liberalism has promised in the first place.²⁰ This is a radical demand; for keeping the promise of giving everybody equal rights, liberties and the status of equal citizenship has become impossible to achieve within capitalism or its impossibility has been unmistakably posited. In these dark times, instead of insisting on an organic intertwining, Wallerstein proposes a politics of bringing together oppositional political demands without stitches, allowing them to walk the same path side by side.²¹

Yes we are going through “hard” times. Hard and complex. Calamitous and malign. And we are weak and highly ineffective. The fragmentation of our collective experience, when multiplied by

¹⁹ The well-known formula of professor Küçükömer (1925-1987) which asserted that the political notions of left and right were established in completely reversed positions in the specificity of the Turkish Republic. (e.n.)

²⁰ In reference to the distinction “liberal-libertarian” which I have not utilized in this article, see a clear proponent of this attitude: Yavuz Yıldırım, “Liberal değil liberter,” *Radikal iki*, 14 September 2008.

²¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Liberalizmden Sonra [After Liberalism]*, trans. Erol Öz, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul 1998, p. 252-3.

the pace and complexity of the current “headlines,” renders it difficult to politically conceptualize what is going on. It becomes difficult to connect each calamity and malice to each other, and to maintain a “consistency” while doing so. It is natural for those who have come to “grab” the underlying common patterns behind these issues or for those who have gone down to the roots of the matters, to embrace that common ground, that root. It feels good to embrace a “clear and concise” way of explanation together with an Us, an identity, and to be able to define and position oneself accordingly. Yet, the side effect of this is that it locks the political mind and attitude into a “position,” reducing them to an identity. The side effect of this is – here I will repeat the danger of cynicism – becoming blind to and losing contact with the ways in which people relate to concrete issues in a direct manner, and their lived experiences in this regard. To be reduced to an identity dries up the left. “Leftists” cannot substitute the Left.²²

Breaking away, separation/differentiation, is a conceptual and political experience that revolutionary socialism has romanticized. In fact, it has been increasingly fetishized as such; we know how a discourse of “purification” that has come to be viewed almost as the ultimate political activity can lead to a cruel purge. It is just a pathetic and desperate consolation to seek ways of confirming one's righteousness by getting rid of defected elements, throwing out the sandbags, differentiating oneself from the others in times of crisis, retreat, or after a defeat. To differentiate between socialism and “left-liberalism/liberal-leftism,” to transform this distinction into a politically productive one... Yes, we do need that. However, it cannot be achieved through a campaign for purification that bans the issues that pertain to the “liberal agenda,” and transforms the critique of “formal freedoms,” and “formal democracy” into cynicism. Socialism cannot be imprisoned by its “anti-”s; liberalism cannot be *overcome* with such a sterile anti-liberalism. A separation that seeks to protect an identity and is fuelled by the fetishism of breaking away/separation, would only be an ineffective disintegration. The left should know of ways to tap into the lines of high voltage between liberalism and itself. Never only and especially from there, but from there *as well*... Yes, we do need a theoretical-political clarification; nonetheless, this does not cast aside the necessity and vitality of a broad definition of the left – try to adopt the rule “operating within the largest possible group with the narrowest of cadres” to the plane of common-sense!

Translated from Turkish by Emir Benli

²² Yet another point that Şükrü Argın insists upon; see the interview in September 2008 issue of *Mesele*.