Globalizations and the Transformation of Environmental Activism: Turkey since the 1980s

Gabriel Ignatow

Department of Sociology
University of North Texas
USA

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ignatow@unt.edu

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Social scientists have developed two main accounts of how globalization processes have impacted environmental activism and politics, both of which employ imagery of global center and periphery. In the first, anti-globalization account, transnational corporations based in developed countries export neoliberal economic policies and polluting, low-wage industries from global center to periphery. Both are resisted by local movements in developing countries, which in anti-globalization accounts are seen as opposed to the intrusions of multinational corporations and national governments into local communitarian settings (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Roberts and Thanos 2003).

In the second, “institutional” account, environmental movements in developing countries are seen to be patterned on the politics of developed countries. Instances of environmental activism in developing countries are thought to result from flows of information radiating from global center to periphery. Through the global media (Yearley 1996: ch. 4) and global networks of nongovernmental organizations (Meyer, Frank, Hironaka, Schofer, and Tuma 1997; Wapner 1996), environmental activism in the developing world is profoundly shaped by the activism and politics of the developed world. Thus in both anti-globalization and institutional accounts of global environmentalism, environmental politics in developing countries is viewed as driven by processes originating in developed core nations. These arguments thereby imply that instances of environmental activism take roughly the same form worldwide, because they are driven by homogenizing processes originating in the global core.

The distinction between global core and periphery (or North and South, developed and developing countries) has been used to explain environmental social movements and politics, as well as public opinion on environmental issues. Inglehart (1995; see Kidd and Lee 1997) has argued that increasing public concern for the environment is part of a broad shift in values, a shift resulting from the widespread wealth and material security of advanced capitalist societies in the postwar era. More recently, analysts have argued for two types of environmentalism, “Northern” and “Southern.” In the global North, environmentalism is thought to be concerned with global problems like the ozone hole and global warming. Southern environmentalism is more concerned with local issues of pollution and deforestation that have immediate consequences for health and welfare (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Brechin 1999; Ignatow 2005a).

In this paper I argue that globalization processes are transforming environmental activism and politics in ways not captured by center/periphery or North/South theoretical models. While such arguments illuminate some of the relations between globalization and environmental politics, complex changes in these relations demand a theoretical perspective that does not reduce globalization entirely to westernization or homogenization. I will argue that it is useful to recognize how globalizing processes not only engender global uniformity, but also animate ethnic and religious identities and give rise to hybrid forms of culture and politics.

Analysts of globalization generally agree that “nightmare scenarios” of global capitalist monoculture (Tomlinson 1999: ch. 3) are unfounded, because cultural products are interpreted differently in different cultural settings (Katz and Liebes 1990), and because globalization not only homogenizes (which it surely does) but also creates new, hybrid cultural forms that are at once local and global (Nederveen Pieterse 1995). Globalizing processes flow not only from global core to periphery (Appadurai 1996). Rather, by weakening states’ sovereignty and speeding communications between members of transnational communities, globalization hybridizes, particularizes, and postmodernizes culture and politics (Crook,
Pakulsky, and Waters 1992; Lemert 1997; Mirchandani 2005: 98-106). These hybridizing and postmodernizing processes are increasingly reflected in environmental politics. Since the 1980s, for example, religious-environmental movements have emerged in many countries (Erdur 1997; Kearns 1997), as have women’s environmental groups and environmental justice groups who tie environmental concerns to issues of institutional racism and discrimination (Cole and Foster 2000). While some students of global environmentalism have recognized that environmental activism has developed in distinct ways in different parts of the world (Brechin 1999: 807), theories of globalization have only recently been brought to bear on environmentalism in ways that account for this observed diversity and hybridity (Ignatow 2005a,b).

This paper examines trends in environmental activism and politics in Turkey from the early 1980s to 2005. Beginning with a military coup in 1980, in this period Turkey rapidly opened its economy and media to global competition. In the same period, for the first time the Turkish government began to work to improve Turkey’s coastal areas, waterways, and urban air quality. Independent environmental organizations were established, and citizen activism increased sharply. I argue below that environmental activism and politics in this period has been profoundly affected by forces of economic, political, and cultural globalization, and that the relations between environmentalism and globalization are not adequately captured by core-periphery models. Instead I argue that globalizing forces have transformed environmental activism by eroding the sovereignty and hegemony of the Turkish state, and by supporting ethnic and religious minority groups within Turkey. This has resulted in fusions of environmental and ethnic and religious identity politics. Before discussing the changing face of environmental activism in Turkey, however, some background on Turkish politics and society is in order.

Globalization and Civic Activism in Turkey

Globalization forces can hit semiperipheral countries like Turkey especially hard, because while such countries have large enough markets to attract international investors, their ability to cushion and channel globalization’s impacts through civic and governmental institutions is relatively weak (Şahin and Aksoy 1993: 31). In Turkey economic liberalization, media liberalization, accelerating emigration, and the prospect of membership in the European Union have fractured the ways of life and national identity of what had long been a relatively isolated and deeply conservative country.

In the 1970s Turkey experienced political and sectarian violence (van Bruinessen 1996), a return of Islam to public life, and a gradual decline in public faith in the state’s top-down programs of secularism and modernization. The military took over in 1980, ostensibly to reverse these trends and reestablish Kemalism (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s vision of secularism and societal development). In the years following the coup Turkey was governed by Prime Minister Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party, a party committed not to strict secularism but rather to a combination of Islam, nationalism, dedication to industrial growth, and commitment to membership in the European Union. In order to integrate Turkey into the global economy, in the 1980s Özal’s government mixed parochial conceptions of Islamic identity with liberal values in which the marketplace was dominant. This “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” continued violent repression of leftist and Kurdish movements, but by integrating majority Sunni Islamic elements into the state bureaucracy, police, and military, it inadvertently encouraged identity movements that sought autonomy from a state now seen as favoring Sunni Islam. For these and other reasons, beginning in the 1980s Turkey shifted from a politics of hegemonic nationalism to one of increasing tolerance for identity politics.
In 1982 the military government, looking to prevent a recurrence of the violent unrest of the 1970s, introduced a more restrictive constitution. Replacing a fairly liberal document, the new constitution stifled the political demands of various constituencies and enshrined the sovereignty of international trade laws over national laws (Çoban 2002; Ignatow 2005a). Later, in the spring and summer of 1995, Turkey signed a series of agreements with international agencies for structural economic reforms and protection of foreign investments. The streets of Turkish cities were increasingly filled with foreign cars, and shopping malls offered foreign fashions, foods, and electronics. Turkey also liberalized its media sector, which had been a monolithic, state-run enterprise. In 1982 Turkey had a single state-run television channel, in 1989 three state-run channels, and in 1992 six television and four radio channels, all operated by the state (Şahin and Aksoy 1993: 31-32). Beginning in late 1992, within a matter of months the state channels had lost most of their viewers to satellite channels beamed into Turkey, unlicensed, from Germany by a Swiss company, and by the late 1990s satellite and cable television offered Turkish viewers hundreds of channels, new and glitzy programs, foreign football matches, political parody, and Turkish and foreign sit-coms and talk shows. Media globalization had a homogenizing effect, forcing Turkish programs to take their cue from international broadcasts. But it was also particularizing, breaking up the official, unitary national identity and presenting instead a postmodern, “anything goes” media landscape made up of Islamic sermons, lascivious advertisements, Greek songs, and eventually, under pressure from the EU, programs in Kurdish.

Turkey’s accelerating economy experienced currency crises in 1994 and again in 2001. Each time, inflation of the Turkish lira was exponential, and unemployment and bankruptcies both skyrocketed. Both crises revealed the depth of corruption in industry and government, and rattled the public’s faith in their leaders (Toksöz 2002: 147). As the state found itself subject to globalizing forces in the 1980s and 1990s, internal factors further contributed to a decline in public faith in the state. The increased sense of normality following the government’s victory in the bloody Kurdish war for independence led the majority of citizens to a greater acceptance of Turkey’s cultural and ethnic pluralism (Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000: 2), long viewed by the secular establishment as a threat to national unity. Groups once marginalized or stigmatized by the state, including “Islamists, Alevis, Kurds, ecologists, gays, transsexuals” and others (Göle 1994: 213), began to organize and demand autonomy and equal treatment. Kurds, Laz (who live in the region bordering Georgia), Circassians (who originate from the northern Caucasus), and other ethnic groups began publishing and organizing (van Bruinessen 1996) both within Turkey and across national borders.

Far more shocking, in August 1999 a massive earthquake, its epicenter near Istanbul, killed at least 17,000, injured 30,000, and left 500,000 homeless. The devastation was followed by an outpouring of international support, most dramatically from Greece, long seen as Turkey’s enemy. The government’s immediate response to the disaster was painfully inadequate and slow, especially when compared with the quick and flexible responses of Turkish NGOs and international aid organizations.

[The state] remained paralyzed in the weeks following the disaster. Kizilay [the Turkish equivalent of the Red Cross] was not seen in the area for five days after the disaster had struck. Relief-and-rescue efforts were mainly supplied by neighbors, relatives, individuals…foreign rescue teams and established NGOs (Jalali 2002: 125)
Without aid from foreign governments and NGOs, the Turkish state and military were seen to be helpless in a time of disaster. In the long term, this may well be the most significant legacy of the earthquake (Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000: 6). Thus the 1999 earthquake, along with financial crises and the winding down of the Kurdish war, contributed to the “legitimacy crisis of the strong-state tradition” in Turkey since the 1980s (Keyman and Icduygu 2003: 223).

As with Turkish society generally, environmental activism and politics in Turkey since the 1980s has been deeply affected by globalization processes, and the interaction of globalization processes (economic liberalization, EU accession, and media globalization) and domestic issues (sectarian conflict, the 1999 earthquake, and economic crises). In the 1980s and 1990s Greenpeace and other international environmental groups began to be active in Turkey, and by the late 1990s environmentalism had become institutionalized to the point that secular elites largley dominated environmental politics. Guided by Western and international standards, scientists, bureaucrats, business groups, and environmental NGOs with close ties to both business groups and the state worked to improve urban air quality and slow coastal erosion, all the while assuming a compatibility of environmental protection and industrial modernization. Yet as public faith in the secular state eroded, secular nationalists found themselves competing with new forms of identity politics, in the environmental field as elsewhere.

**TRANSNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISMS**

As external and internal pressures have transformed Turkish society, secular nationalist environmentalism has lost much of the dynamism it had as late as the early 1990s, and now competes with newer hybrid religious-environmental and ethnic-environmental movements. Below I discuss two of these movements: Islamist and Alevi-Kurdish environmentalisms.

**Islamist Environmentalism**

Islamist environmentalism has emerged as a sub-movement within the resurgent Turkish Islamist movement, and is primarily a movement of intellectuals—of professors, journalists, and popular nonfiction writers. While it is primarily intellectual rather than political, Islamist environmentalist writers’ columns and books reach millions, and they promote, with varying degrees of success, major social and political changes in Turkish society.

The Turkish Islamist movement, energized by the Turkish state’s legitimacy crisis, achieved its greatest success with the victory of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in national elections in 2002, a victory generally seen as linked to dissatisfaction with Turkey’s economic conditions and widespread corruption in the secular establishment, rather than to a broad desire for regime change in an Islamic direction. Turkish Islamism’s roots lie in a network of devout, politically engaged Islamist businessmen and industrialists, made up largely of members of clandestine religious orders (*tarikat*) that emerged out of the economic reforms of the 1980s (Gülalp 2003: 6; 1992). Residing mostly in fast-growing cities in eastern Turkey, this new, culturally parochial “Anatolian bourgeoisie” supported Islamist causes with contributions to Islamist political parties and charitable foundations, and by funding scholarships and building *imam hatip* religious schools and dormitories. Emigration from Turkey to Germany and other EU member states also created new sources of support for Islamist causes. “Islamic capital” (Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000: 4) flowed to central Anatolia from Turkish workers in Germany and other EU nations. Expatriate Turks also provided models of Islamist organization and political participation,
due to the greater freedoms of religious expression in the EU and to the easy flow of information across borders into Turkey. Turkish Islamists also received support from global civil society, mainly as an ally against state hegemony. Where the United Nations and international nongovernmental organizations were once seen as a front for western imperialism, many Islamists now regard open relations with global civil society as the best guarantee of their rights to free speech and unhindered political activity ( Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000: 9), and Islamists who once denounced the European Union as an “infidel club” now “welcome the prospect of membership as a means of religious autonomy and the freedom to organize politically on the model of Christian Democracy” (Mango 2002: 34). The current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while mayor of Istanbul, lobbied for the inclusion of Islamic tarikat (secret societies) at a United Nations conference on civil society being held in Istanbul, though in the end they were not allowed to participate.

As political Islam emerged in Turkey in the 1980s and ’90s, its views were articulated by a generation of “hybrid intellectuals” (Erdur 1997). University-educated, highly literate and plugged in to trends in Western intellectual life, these journalists and academics nonetheless represent positions of deep cultural conservatism. Most have rural backgrounds, and many attended imam hatip religious schools before college. They went on to positions in Islamist newspapers, publishing houses, and universities. Many have become public intellectuals in Turkey, some have spent time abroad, and several hold positions in the AKP government. Almost all of them know each other personally.

This group of Turkish Islamist intellectuals established a number of publishing houses, highbrow journals, and popular magazines. Their writings are published in glossy, well-produced paperback books, in Turkey’s daily newspapers, and on Islamist web sites, and they appear often on television discussion shows. Since the 1980s, their books and articles have fused religious and environmental concerns, and have made the case that fault for environmental problems in Turkey and the world lies squarely with the West.

While a spectrum of positions is found in Islamists’ writings on the environment (Pusch 1995), they are universally anti-western. Claims of cultural authenticity play a role in nearly all Islamist-environmentalist writings, as Islam is seen as the authentic source of environmental consciousness, preceding western environmentalist ideas. Modernity, on the other hand, is biased and ‘bigoted.’ Because modernity is seen to be based on science, Islamists argue that science, far from being unbiased, has its own beliefs and values, and as such has no epistemological advantage over tradition and religion (Toprak 1993). The secular outlook in science, as it developed in the West, is contrasted with Islamic conceptions of Allah’s revelations. Worship of science and technology has led to cultural, spiritual, and physical pollution, waste, and destruction. Science, technology, capitalism, and modern militaries conspire to degrade the earth and human beings alike.

Deniz Gürsel, whose real name is Erol Göka (http://www.erolgoka.com), wrote the first major Turkish Islamist publication on environmental issues. He is an undersecretary in Turkey’s Ministry of Health, a coordinator for the Higher Education Ministry, and a researcher and psychiatrist working at a teaching and research hospital in Ankara. His writings cover topics including science, philosophy, youth, the social sciences, and the environment. His 1989 book Çevrezizsiniz (‘You are Environment-less’) is mainly a critique of both westernization and western environmentalism (hence the title). The tone is set early in the book.
On the one hand, the pleasure of being able to say something from the embracing perspective with which Islam looks at nature. On the other hand the sorrow of falling behind the West again, in environmental awareness and defending nature, of feeling ‘No matter what I do, I will be in the position of following them’ (13-14)

Gürsel’s overriding concern is to present an Islamic perspective on environmental problems while resisting becoming, or at least being labeled, a western environmentalist.

With my western environmentalists there is no connection, but it’s as if I can share the same concerns…I have to reject this stepmother, and really nourish and watch over myself as I can go down this road (14)

Gürsel sees western environmentalists as atheistic and intolerant. Only Islam, he argues, can provide the basis for a sound environmental ethics. The environment, Gürsel argues, is ‘our problem,’ and we ought to solve it in our own way. The Islamic understanding of nature is the ‘deepest in the universe’ (52) because it is based on the teachings of the prophet Muhammad and the imams. While societies based on science and economics destroy nature, a society based on Islamic ethics would preserve nature, humans, and the cosmos.

Another major Islamist environmentalist, Ali Bulaç is widely considered one of the most influential Islamists in the Middle East. He writes a weekly column in a mass circulation newspaper, edits a highbrow journal on politics and society, and has published over a dozen books. His thought is a striking pastiche of Islam, sociology, and cultural conservatism. In his major theoretical work Religion and Modernism (1995) he discusses the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Vietnam, the West’s support for apartheid in South Africa, and Serbian massacres of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He critiques orientalism and western modernization policies of the 1960s. Environmental destruction is, for Bulaç, a product of westernization and modernization. In an early chapter on ecosystems and sustainable development, he discusses problems of overproduction, overconsumption, and waste; the 1984 Bhopal disaster; Chernobyl; agribusiness; pesticides; soil erosion; underground water supplies; water pollution; air pollution; hydroelectric projects in Turkey’s southeast and their future social costs; the Brundtland Report on sustainable development; and a World Bank Report on environmental destruction. The cause of all of this, for Bulaç, is Western ‘welfare and civilization,’ which amounts to ‘more TVs, more refrigerators, more deodorant, more possessions’ (p. 61). The alternative to Western materialism is Islam. ‘Religion is coming back,’ claims Bulaç, and in Turkey ‘the first concrete signs’ of a religious revolution are already appearing.

Islamist Environmental Politics

As Islamists came to power in Turkey in the late 1990s, environmental issues were a conspicuous part of their platform. While mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current Prime Minister, oversaw major efforts to improve air and water quality. Environmental issues were also incorporated into Islamist electoral rhetoric. Erdoğan’s campaign speeches focused on the threat by big business to environmentally sensitive land, specifically to attempts by a large Turkish holding company to obtain rights to build on forested land in Istanbul (White 2002: 202).
When they gained power, Erdoğan’s AKP party appointed Ibrahim Özdemir, another prominent Islamist environmentalist, to a post in the education ministry. And Zeynep Karahan Uslu, the wife of Ibrahim Uslu, yet another Islamist environmentalist (Uslu 1995), was appointed vice president of the AKP public relations office. And yet, in spite of the appointments and earlier rhetoric, overall the AKP reversed course on environmental issues. Deferring to its constituencies in the business sector and to pressures from international lenders, the AKP supported the building of a long-delayed nuclear power plant in Akkuyu (compare this with Ali Bulaç’s position squarely against nuclear energy) and, more shockingly, in 2003 promoted constitutional amendments to the Turkish ‘Forest Law’. The amendments, which would open public lands to private development, were vetoed by the Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. However, since the president can only veto laws once, the AKP government, which had a majority in Parliament, was able to adopt the law without any alterations. President Sezer then petitioned the high court to reverse the law, which had been harshly criticized by members of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and environmental groups. The CHP representative Yasar Tuzun charged that the bill could lead to the destruction of 100,000 hectares of forest, and to flood disasters in the Black Sea region.

Islamist environmentalists have not had much effect on Islamist or national politics. While they are popular intellectuals and critics, they have not been successful activists (Toprak 1993: 259). Ali Bulaç blames the failure of Islamist environmentalism on the lack of a major environmental catastrophe in Turkey, and on environmentalists’ failure to communicate with the public (2004 interview). Ibrahim Özdemir (2001) blames the Ottoman-Turkish political tradition, in which conformity and mutual obligations are the rule, and civil disobedience is squelched. Yet there would seem to be external causes for this failure as well. Islamist environmentalism, like other environmental movements in Turkey, is limited by some of the same globalizing forces that have encouraged political activism (Ignatow 2005a). In Turkey, environmental movements’ political opportunities have been curtailed by revisions to the national constitution enshrining international trade law over domestic law (Çoban 2002). The liberalization of the Turkish economy, media, and society has thus both encouraged social activism and, in many instances, sharply limited its ultimate impact. Yet despite the their failures, the very existence of Islamist environmentalism, a hybrid ideological movement combining western environmentalism, critical theory, and Islam, challenges center-periphery theories of environmentalism in developing countries. Islamist environmentalists do not represent a straightforward local or communitarian reaction to economic liberalization, nor have they wholeheartedly embraced western environmentalism. Instead, they have blended environmentalism with local identities and traditions—and they are not the only group in Turkey to have done so.

Alevi-Kurdish Activism

My eyes are full of tears when I see Greenpeace. They come from all over the world to save the Marmara, the Bosphorus, Izmir, and Izmit. These are very important things for the future and for humanity. I wish all citizens would be sensitive, and resist this kind of destruction. But this is a mass work, a work for democratic mass organizations (Celal Arslan, Alevi religious leader)

Alevis are a complex and very large religious minority in Turkey. Numbering about fifteen million (population estimates vary widely), they make up a quarter or so of the Turkish population. Alevis are divided by ethnicity—there are
populations of Kurdish, Turkic, and Arabic Alevi— and by language, with Alevi groups speaking Turkish, Kurdish, Kurmanji, Zaza, and Arabic. With recent migration to western cities (mostly Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir), Alevis are close to becoming an underclass in some areas (Shankland 2003). Nonetheless, Turkey’s Alevi population has experienced a twenty-year “Alevi revival.” The emergence of Alevi identity politics is entwined with an upsurge of Alevi environmental activism in Tunceli, Bergama, Akkuyu and other regions of Turkey, and with movements within Kurdish circles away from separatism and Marxism and toward demands for cultural recognition and freedoms within the Turkish political order.

Alevi beliefs

Alevi theology is sometimes described as a liberal or lax form of Shia Islam, though it is linked to Iranian Shiism only through belief in the imams, the Prophet Mohamed and his twelve descendants. Alevism is more accurately seen as an unorthodox, holistic, mystical belief system indigenous to Anatolia “covered by a thin gauze of Islam” (alevi.org.au/alevi.html). Alevi folk culture has survived in Anatolia and the Balkans for over a thousand years, though Alevi philosophy and theology is identified with Hunkar Haci Bektaşhi Veli, who arrived in Anatolia from Persia around the fourteenth century and established a school of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. Over the centuries hi holistic and monotheist teachings were influenced by Pantheism, Neo-Platonism, Greek philosophy, Hindu-Iranian religious sources such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Shamanism, and Shiism and Christian mysticism. Alevis claim their tradition is distinguished by a strong intellectualism and a strong love for nature (http://www.alevi.org.au). Poems, music, and dancing are featured in Alevi rituals and prayers. The themes of Alevi poems are mainly morality, the love of God, nature, human relationships, individual virtue, lamentation for the sacred clergies and scholars, and education.

The Alevi revival

Much like Turkey’s Islamists, Alevis in the 1980s and 1990s demanded greater recognition from the Turkish state and society. Numerous Alevi associations and foundations were established, most of them staffed and supported by urbanized middle-class Alevis (Erdemir 2003; for a discussion of similar movements elsewhere see Shnirelman 2002: 198). This Alevi renaissance was motivated partly by a history of discrimination and violent persecution in both the Ottoman and Republican eras. For decades Turkish leaders, seeking to suppress Turkey’s ethnic heterogeneity, had denied the reality of a distinct Alevi identity, and in so doing pushed Alevis away from the political mainstream. Many incidents of violence during the 1970s that were portrayed as clashes between rightists and leftists were also cases of Sunnis massacring Alevis. Scores were killed in 1978 around Kahramanmaras in southern Turkey, and in 1993 a mob of Sunni fundamentalists set fire to a hotel in Sivas where pro-Alevi intellectuals were holding a conference. Nearly forty were killed inside as the police, whose ranks were dominated by conservative Sunnis and right-wing radicals, stood by.

Thus the state’s discriminatory treatment of Alevis provided Alevi organizational elites with an opportunity to emerge as religious power brokers who ensured the survival of Alevi organizations. Until the 1980s, the Turkish state had outlawed expressions of ethnic or religious identity. Grass roots activists and community organizations could not have ethnic or religious names or slogans. By 1995, however, Alevis were able to establish the Cem Foundation and other smaller groups, and in 1997 they established an Alevi business organization along the lines of existing secular and Islamist business associations.
The same globalizing forces that have supported Islamism in Turkey (economic liberalization, supranational political integration, and globalized communications) have supported the Alevi revival as well. Turkish Alevi communities in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain, and Australia established web sites, research institutes, and cultural programs, and these communities provided crucial organizational and financial support to Alevis in Turkey (Massicard 2003). Like Islamists, Turkish Alevis have established ties to global civil society, although for Alevis these ties are ideological as well as pragmatic. Alevi values of humanism and free thought are presented as compatible with global civil society’s guiding values. One Alevi web site claims that “at its heart, the philosophy of Haci Bektaşi Veli incorporates the same substance as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948” (www.adiyamanli.org/haciBektaşi.html).

Alevi Environmentalism

Alevi environmentalism combines traditional Alevi beliefs with ideas drawn from science and global civil society. The Environment in Alevi-Bektaşiism, a 1998 book by Nuket Endirçe, a longtime civil servant turned freelance writer, is both a primer on environmental problems and an argument for the compatibility of Alevism and ecologism. Endirçe discusses water, air, and soil pollution, coastal erosion, the destruction of forests and animal species, and urbanization and population pressures. He argues that in contrast to Renaissance and Enlightenment thought, Alevi-Bektaşi philosophy and theology is intrinsically friendly to the environment, and traditional Alevi ways of life are ecologically sustainable. He finds in Alevi thought themes of holism and nature-society interdependence (12). In spite of their technology, humans need to respect the oneness and balance of nature: “Alevi-Bektaşi thought sees a unity in nature. A harmony can be seen in how everything in nature completes every other thing” (43). Endirçe includes in his book traditional Alevi poems and folk songs that include nature themes of soil, flowers, water, and trees. Alevi web sites too often include sections on environmental issues. The web site of Turna Derneği (The Crane Association) includes a long discussion of ekolojik denge (ecological balance). “The environmental problem is one of the biggest problems for humans of our day,” it claims, but Alevis, “being friends of nature and humanity, are against the pollution of both nature and humans until the end…in our time we are the most active in working for nature protection.” Describing fundamental Alevi beliefs, the web site of the Hubyar Sultan Alevi Culture Association (www.hubyar.org) claims that Alevism is the “friend of nature and the environment…Alevis believe that everything has a soul, including rocks, trees, and everything in nature. For this reason Alevis hold all things in nature to be sacred.”

In an interview in Istanbul in March 2004 Celal Arslan, an Alevi dede (revered elder), discussed how environmentalism is a valued tradition for Alevis.

We give primary importance to the environment all the time for our and our children’s future. Our ancestors planted a tree wherever they saw water. The importance of tree has come down to us. When we were young our elders used to say “Plant trees as long as you live. Even if you yourself cannot benefit, other living things such as birds and wolves can benefit,” and they planted a love of nature in us. But over time, the slaughter of nature increased. I am telling you as an Alevi, as a Dede, we should give environmental consciousness to our children.
In the same interview, Ayhan Aydin, head of the Culture Department of the Cem Foundation, discussed Alevi beliefs and environmental activism. Aydin, who writes regularly in the popular monthly Cem Magazine, discussed the importance of roses and other flowers in Alevi homes, Alevi customs of praying and apologizing to trees before cutting them down, and lion, crane, deer, and horse symbolism in Alevi theology. He claims that for Alevis environmentalism is a culturally authentic stance: “in Alevism the human-environment relationship was naturally created hundreds of years ago. Alevis are a nature-loving people. Why do Alevis differ from Sunnis in caring for nature?…For Alevis there is an element of loving beauty and of not damaging the world.” Aydin is disappointed with urbanized Alevis, who he feels have lost much of their heritage, though he is not reactionary, and his ideals are largely Kemalist, balancing national development and nature preservation.

I am a patriotic intellectual, I want my country to develop and progress, however I do not want our people or humanity to be harmed during this progress. As an Alevi researcher, I am against nuclear power plants. As you know there are plenty of other potential sources of energy such as wind energy and many more. Turkey does not make use of these, just like it gives importance to highways rather than railways, and projects that can be harmful to Turkish people are established. This is not only my personal view: as an institution we are against these kinds of harmful things.

Unlike Islamist environmentalists, Alevis have been quite politically active on environmental issues. Sometimes under the banner of Alevism, but also through ethnic and regional identifications, Alevis have mobilized to protest environmentally questionable government and industry projects. The most recent Alevi (or more accurately Alevi-Kurdish or Kurdish-Alevi) environmental actions have focused on a dam project in the Munzur Valley in the politically volatile Tunceli region of Anatolia. Tunceli is an almost entirely Alevi and Kurdish region renowned for its natural beauty, and for widespread socialist and anti-government sympathies. The government’s dam project there involves eight planned dams, two of which are already finished (though the completed dams are on branches of the Munzur River, rather than in the main river valley itself). A third dam is completed but its reservoir is not filled. Anti-dam activists claim that a dam in the Tunceli valley will bring the water level to the foot of the city, flooding roads and cutting off and depopulating already isolated villages surrounding Tunceli—villages that were subject to forced migration during the Kurdish war in the 1990s. Flooding the roads to these villages will make it all but impossible for the state to return villagers to their home villages, as agriculture, beekeeping, and animal husbandry, which were difficult during the war because of military restrictions on travel, will be impractical.

Tunceli’s residents have protested against the proposed damming of the Munzur valley for years, and many of the protests have been organized around the annual Tunceli Festival, held in August. The festival is large, with venues in Tunceli and several neighboring villages, and draws thousands of tourists to the region from Turkey and other countries. Many of the international visitors are Turks from the Tunceli region living in Europe returning for summer holiday. Many of these same emigrants also fund Tunceli organizations, including environmental and anti-dam groups. The Tunceli festival generally lasts four days, and often includes protest marches and panels of invited speakers. In August 2004, the protests and panels were mostly focused on the Munzur dam issue. In the festival stands in the city, tables were devoted to the Munzur issue, and both environmental and Marxist-leftist groups passed out journals related to the proposed dam. One
panel was held in the small town of Ovacik northwest of Tunceli, one of the towns expected to be most hurt by the dam. The panel was made up mostly of scientists and civic leaders arguing against the dam, and was followed by a protest march from the town to the dam site.

Though the Tunceli protestors mostly identified themselves as Tunceliler (citizens of Tunceli), the protests included a heavy dose of Alevi symbolism. An elaborate theater show at the end of one march, before an anti-dam discussion panel, depicted Alevi traditions related to the sacredness of the river and valley. The show featured sacred animals (four women dressed as deer, and trout) and old village stories about the river. According to legend, there are forty springs at the start of river, the “source” (Göze, a term with religious connotations in this region). Munzur Baba, a sacred wise man, once dropped a bucket of milk there, creating the white frothy water. The extremely cold water is still used for religious rites. Alevi light candles in the rocks to make wishes, and the river is featured in Alevi religious paintings. Festival groups and tourists travel to Ziyaret village at the source of the Munzur (the word ziyaret has religious meaning for Alevis; it is forbidden to touch ziyaret trees, and Alevis tie pieces of cloth to them to make wishes).

Other environmental activities by Alevis include an environmentally-themed architectural competition for Cemeviler (Alevi houses of worship), organized by the Cem Foundation in 1996, and tree planting campaigns in Istanbul’s Gazi district, Maltepe, and other regions.

Like Islamists, for Alevis global civil society is seen as an ally. Alevi groups have tight ties to Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and many other international NGOs. One Alevi web site lists links to six environmental INGOs and several Turkish environmental NGOs. And much of the support for Alevi environmentalism, like support for Alevi identity politics generally, comes from Alevis living abroad in Europe, Australia and elsewhere. Discussing a company’s plans to mine for gold near Kıırıntı, a large Alevi village, Ayhan Aydın brought up the international dimension.

When I went to Germany, I met friends there, and they were very sensitive about this issue. They have begun a very big campaign so that Kıırıntı will not become the next Bergama, and with the support coming from Germany, a bus full of people went there to talk to administrators. There are many people from Kıırıntı, Yeniköy, and Siran in Rumeli Hisarüstü, and these people have shown the same reaction: they do not want gold mined in those places.

Globalizations, States, and Environmentalisms

Analysts of global environmental activism and politics have been slow to recognize the impacts of basic globalization processes on environmental activism and politics. Economic liberalization has eroded states’ sovereignty over domestic environmental matters (Ignatow 2005a) and empowered previously marginal economic actors. As economic liberalization and the emergence of economic networks among Turks living in Turkey and other countries have enriched economic actors outside circles of secular, urban elites closely tied to the state, communications technology and cultural globalization trends have eroded states’ control over national media outlets. Both economic and media globalization have thus given rise to identity movements supported by emigrant communities and the transnational ethnic and religious networks they have created. These movements have also received support from projects of supranational political
integration, including the United Nations and European Union. In combination, these globalizing trends have given rise to hybrid religious-environmental, ethnic-environmental, and women’s-environmental movements (Ignatow 2005b).

Are anti-globalization or institutional accounts useful for explaining Islamist and Alevi environmentalism, and other complex, hybrid, glocalized movements? Here the applicability of these two arguments seems limited. Both rely on imagery of global center and periphery, and in so doing either tacitly or explicitly equate globalization with homogenization, be it the global spread of neoliberal economics or of environmentalist ideas. Yet as globalization theorists have moved beyond center-periphery models to more complex, multidimensional conceptions of globalizing processes (Appadurai 1996; Smith 2001; Nederveen-Pieterse 2003), we are led to wonder whether center-periphery models of globalization adequately explain contemporary environmental activism and politics. The case of Turkey suggests that these models, while valuable, are not sufficient. In terms of anti-globalization arguments, the 1980 military coup and subsequent “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” all but destroyed Turkey’s political left, and secular anti-globalization movements, most notably the Turkish Communist Party, are small and not very consequential. Turkish Islamists, in spite of their occasional anti-colonial and anti-globalization rhetoric, for the most part allied themselves with economically liberal industrialists in the 1980s, and then with the European Union and United Nations in the 1990s.

In institutional arguments, environmental activism and politics in developing countries is explained partly in terms of ideas and practices radiating from developed to developing nations. The global spread of environmentalist ideas is thought to occur via both global civil society and the world media. Institutional arguments go a long way toward explaining secular nationalist environmental politics in Turkey, as the state and major secular nationalist environmental groups have been quite explicit about trying to bring Turkey up to international environmental standards. Secular nationalist environmentalists have had some major successes in slowing coastal erosion and improving urban air quality. Yet as these efforts began to lose public credibility in the 1990s, it became clear that Turkey’s compliance with international and European Union environmental standards was limited at best (European Union Commission 2002). Further, the Turkish state and secular establishment was confronted with increasing external pressures from economic liberalization, media liberalization, and the EU accession process. These globalizing pressures recontextualized domestic issues, including economic crises, the Kurdish war, and the 1999 earthquake, exposing the state to international comparison and criticism. The state and secular establishment found themselves increasingly distrusted by the public as a result. In the environmental realm, as we have seen, these trends gave rise to forms of environmental activism that diverged sharply from secular nationalist ideals, and to a degree from the kinds of universalized beliefs and practices (democracy, human rights, education, science, the environment) that are well accounted for by institutional arguments (Meyer, Ramirez, Schofer, and Drori 2003).

Turkish Islamism and Islamist environmentalism, and Alevism and Alevi environmentalism, are products of complex globalizing forces, but they are neither mainly communitarian reactions to economic liberalization nor imitations of western social movements. They are, as postmodernists put it, hybrids. These sorts of hybrid environmental movements ought to encourage analysts of globalization and of environmentalism to take more seriously theoretical arguments that accept the reality of postmodern social trends (Crook, Pakulsky and Waters 1992; Lemert 1997; Mirchandani 2005: 98-
Yet while I have argued that movements like Islamist and Alevi environmentalism should not be seen mainly as local reactions to economic liberalization, it is important to recognize that Turkey's position of economic dependence in the world economy in some ways limits the ultimate success of movements like these (Ignatow 2005a). The point here is not to gloss over global economic realities, but rather to recognize how globalizing forces play out in complex, conflicting, paradoxical ways that are not always captured in current analyses of globalization and the environment.
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