Book Review

Axel Gehring. 2019. *Vom Mythos des starken Staates und der europäischen Integration der Türkei. Über eine Ökonomie an der Peripherie des euro-atlantischen Raumes*, Wiesbaden: Springer (Globale Politische Ökonomie). 458 pp., ISBN: 978-3-658-24571-9 (Softcover), ISBN: 978-3-658-24572-6 (eBook), € 54.99 / € 42.99

Reviewed by **Malte Fuhrmann**, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, Germany.
E-mail: Malte.Fuhrmann@zmo.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0012>

With its huge and influential army, the systematic and arbitrary use of judicial and executive powers against dissidents, and its long history of an active state role in the economy, few would challenge the widespread notion that modern Turkey is a “strong state”. Nonetheless, Axel Gehring claims that he can debunk this construct as a myth. By bringing together “materialist state theory and Gramscian theory of hegemony” (435)—the latter, however, not in a cultural studies variety, but more closely tied to class struggles—Gehring reviews the key political and economic developments of the last 100 years in Turkish history. He then turns to the intellectual climate of the 1990s and 2000s, in which a number of leftist and liberal Turkish intellectuals as well as political agents and opinion-makers from the European Union (EU) deplored the tradition of the strong state in Turkey dating back to Ottoman times, which needed to be overcome in favour of a stronger civil society. These claims, according to the author, paved the ground for the rise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which was initially seen as part of a wider societal anti-hegemonic coalition aiming to debunk the Kemalist strong state and reform governance according to EU tenets. The AKP concentrated on consolidating the already ongoing economic reforms, continuing to divest the now neoliberally organised economy of possibilities for serious subaltern intervention, in compliance with the EU customs union and *acquis communautaire*. The political apparatus was only reformed where it served to create inroads into state institutions that had previously opposed AKP influence. EU agents continued to applaud these reforms until the Gezi Uprising of 2013 undeniably confronted observers abroad with the fact that the reforms did not serve the strengthening of pluralist society, but rather its violent suppression.

Does the author manage to convince the reader that there never was a “strong state?” Yes and no. Even Gehring does not deny that at different moments in time, certain public institutions intervened heavily into the public sphere. He himself describes how in the initial years of AKP rule, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the

military command, and other institutions actively interfered in politics, claiming to defend a Kemalist state ethos. Gehring's point of critique focuses more on the purported continuity of the strong state. Rather than seeing it as an ontologically given entity from Ottoman centre-periphery conflicts to republican secularist-Islamist clashes, he suggests seeing in it the reflection of various contemporary class and inter-elite struggles instead. Within such struggles, agents of the strong state created their own inventions of tradition; for example, the 1980 post-coup regime laid claim to defend the state ideals of 1923, but according to the author only used this to legitimise a form of "state fetishisation" which had nothing to do with 1920s visions of modernity (332, fn. 10). This important qualifier is unfortunately only made explicit in a footnote, although it adds considerably to the book's power of persuasion.

Does the book succeed in convincing readers of the usefulness of Marxist approaches to modern Turkish history, which had decisively lost their appeal in recent decades? The commendable effort has its highs and lows. While at some points it lives up to its promise of Gramscian fluid thinking, taking neither sub- nor superstructure for granted and instead focusing on the constant reciprocal influence between the two, at other times it changes its narrative to outright materialist determinism. For example, Gehring claims, "The strategies of agents are constituted as a reflection of their specific interests, local power relationships, sedimented knowledge and convictions. This process must not necessarily be a conscious one—the complexity of situations and constellations can easily overwhelm the agents' range of experience and action" (9). Such statements on a material interest which acts independently of cognizance call to mind why scholars at a certain point began to insist on agency in social processes and relegated determinist stances to the margins.

For example, if the chairwoman of the Turkish Industry and Business Association (*Türk Sanayicileri ve İş İnsanları Derneği*, TÜSİAD), Arzuhan Doğan Yalçındağ, polemicised against the possible presidential candidacy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2007, how can one claim that TÜSİAD and the billionaire families organised in it championed the AKP unflinchingly, due to their business interest in neoliberal transformation (360–63)? I have the impression that all too often such contradictory behaviour is brushed over by seeing classes and especially "conflicts between various factions of capital" (9 and passim) at work, rather than specific political parties or individuals. Overall, there is a tendency to overstate the agency of TÜSİAD, the big families—such as Sabancı and Koç—and of the military pension fund during all decisive political and economic transitions in modern Turkish history. While one should not downplay the influence of big business and its propensity to arrange itself with different socioeconomic constellations, believing it to be the main instigator of social change perpetuates the common misinterpretation that Turkey has

always had weak social movements, as it is assumed to be an agrarian society. Nikolaus Brauns has called this assumption among both activists and scholars into question, drawing attention to the vivacity of 1960–1970s activism especially.¹ Also, despite Gehring's claims to the contrary, the fact that the 1980 coup was anything but the purported intervention of a classless state, but rather part and parcel of the restructuring of the Turkish economy according to the dogmas of the International Monetary Fund, is hardly a new revelation (211–3).

A stronger focus on the analysis of the economic and financial dimensions of both contemporary and historical processes in Turkey is badly needed. This should, however, not be attempted by a return to the rigid notions of materialist determinism (and its cumbersome terminology) that pass over human agency and its contradictions in order to fit all events into a single explanatory framework. What is needed instead is an open-ended and multi-level close reading of texts and events in order to determine their relationship to discursive and material hegemony. A positive example is Hasret Dikici Bilgin's brief but highly convincing essay on the applicability of Gramsci's notion of civil society to the Turkish case, which Gehring also cites as exemplary.²

The book under discussion here lives up to this standard in some of its more salient lines of argumentation. In particular, Gehring demonstrates the more or less involuntary connivance of some leftist and liberal intellectuals during the 1990 and 2000s in paving the ground for AKP hegemony, even though he occasionally oversimplifies some authors' arguments. For example, his reduction of Şerif Mardin's 1970s writings to a precursor of this 1990s trend does not do them justice (281), as Hasret Dikici Bilgin has shown in her positive reference to Mardin. Secondly, based on the research of authors such as Çağlar Keyder and Korkut Boratav, Gehring reconstructs how, during what at first glance looks like a long continuity of state-driven import substitution industrialisation in Turkey, the conditions and effects both on the major conglomerates and society in general changed repeatedly. And thirdly, he argues that at several points in time changes that were marketed as advancing the EU accession process were actually motivated primarily by the short-term material interests of agents of capital on both the Turkish and the EU side, rather than by the long-term goal of full membership, which was in fact pursued rather reluctantly by both camps.

1 Brauns, N. 2018. "Geschichte der Linken und Arbeiterbewegung vom Osmanischen Reich bis zum Militärputsch 1980" In *Partisanen einer neuen Welt. Eine Geschichte der Linken und Arbeiterbewegung in der Türkei*, edited by N. Brauns and M. Çakır, 23–266. Berlin: Die Buchmacherei.

2 Dikici Bilgin, H. 2009. "Civil Society and State in Turkey: A Gramscian Perspective" In *Gramsci and Global Politics: Hegemony and Resistance*, edited by M. McNally and J. Schwarzmantel, 107–118. London: Routledge.