

## **TÜRKİYE'DEKİ SİYASİ PARTİLERİN SİVİL TOPLUM ÜZERİNE SÖYLEMLERİ**

**Funda Gençoğlu ONBAŞI\***

### **ÖZET**

Aralarındaki önemli ideolojik farklılıklara rağmen Türkiye’de şu anda parlamentoda bulunan dört siyasi partinin sivil toplum kavramı hakkındaki söylemleri önemli oranda birbirine benzemektedir. Hepsi, benzer biçimde sürekli olarak sivil toplum idealine demokratikleşmeye katkısı olan bir faktör olarak atıfta bulunmaktadır. ‘Demokrasi projesi’ ve bu proje içinde sivil toplumun rolü belli bir çoğulculuk anlayışı (antagonizmasız çoğulculuk) ve konsensüs vurgusu ile izah edilmektedir. Bu siyasi partilerin tümü tarafından aktif vatandaşlığın, gönüllülüğün, dayanışmanın, özerkliğin, hakların ve özgürlüklerin, diyalogun, işbirliğinin ve farklılıkların uyum içinde birarada varoluşunun simgesi olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Ancak, sivil toplumun hayati bazı yönleri bu hakim yaklaşım tarafından göz ardı edilmektedir. En önemlisi, bu yaklaşım sivil toplumun neticede bireylerin karmaşık ve içiçe geçmiş güç ilişkileri ağını ve eşitsizlikleri tecrübe etmek durumunda oldukları bir yaşam alanı olduğunu göstermekte yetersiz kalmaktadır. Sivil toplum kavramı eşitsizliğe yol açan farklılıkların önemli olmadığı ya da toplumsal açıdan sorun teşkil etmediği yanılısamasının pekişmesine hizmet etmek yerine bu güç ilişkilerini vurgulayıp görünür hale getirerek onlara karşı bir meydan okumanın ortaya çıkabilmesinin yolunu açacak bir çözümleme aracı olarak işlev görmelidir. Resmi parti dökümanlarını (parti programları ve seçim bildirgeleri) inceleyerek bu çalışma yaygın kullanımı olan bu romantik sivil toplum kavramsallaştırmasının ve bağıntılı sivil toplum-demokrasi ilişkisi anlayışının eksikleri üzerinde bir tartışma yapmakta ve bunu yaparken post-Marxist literatürde önemli yer tutan güç ve antagonizma kavramlarına başvurmaktadır. Neticede, güç ilişkilerini dezavantajlının konumundan sorunsallaştırmaktaki eksikliği nedeniyle, parlamentodaki siyasi partilerce de paylaşılan egemen sivil toplum anlayışının günümüzün farklılık ve eşitsizliğin biraradalığına dair sorunlarının çözümünde yeni yeni ufuklar açmaktan uzak olduğunu öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sivil toplum, Siyasi partiler, Türkiye, Güç ilişkileri, Antagonizma.

## **POLITICAL PARTIES and the DISCOURSE on CIVIL SOCIETY in TURKEY**

### **ABSTRACT**

Despite ideological differences among them there is an underlying commonality among the four political parties at the Turkish parliament in terms of their discourse on the concept of civil society. They share the same ground due to a constant reference to the ‘ideal’ of civil society as a factor contributing democratization. This role of civil society for the ‘project of democracy’ is explained with reference to a particular understanding of ‘pluralism without antagonism’ and with an emphasis on consensus. Civil society is commonly conceptualized by these political parties as the sphere of active citizenship, voluntariness, solidarity, autonomy, rights and liberties, dialogue, cooperation, harmonious coexistence of differences etc. However, crucial aspects of civil society are ignored by this hegemonic view. Most importantly, this view fails to recognize that civil society is a sphere of life where individuals experience the complex web of interwoven power relations and inequalities. The concept of civil society should serve as the analytical tool to bring these relations to the forefront, to highlight them and hence to make them contestable rather than serving to consolidate the illusion that differences leading to inequalities are not important. Through a reading of official party documents (party programs and election manifestos) this study reflects upon the hitches of this widely employed romantic vision of civil society and its relation with democracy with resort to the post-Marxist literature on power and antagonism. As a result, it argues that, due to its deficiency in problematizing power relations from the point of view of the disadvantaged, the hegemonic conception of civil society, employed by parliamentary parties in Turkey is far from having a potential to provide a new horizon in search of solutions to our problems related with the coexistence of difference and equality.

Keywords: Civil society, Political parties, Turkey, Power relations, Antagonism.

### **Introduction**

A recent manifestation of the centuries-old question of ‘the ideal’ relationship between the individual and the community has been the increasing popularity of the concept of civil society. It seems to have established itself as a ‘paradigmatic concept’ (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 1) resting at the core of many theoretical debates as well as the discourses of political activists, especially political parties. We repeatedly hear phrases like the *resurrection*, *re-emergence*, *reconstruction*, or *renaissance* of civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 29) and people talking about its role in ‘eradicating poverty, in promoting democracy and good

governance, and in resolving social conflict and protecting human rights' (Naidoo and Tandon, 1999: 1). In addition to the dominance of the notion of civil society in political discourses, the number of civil societal organizations (CSOs) has also been steadily increasing (Edwards, 2004).

Despite the proliferation of 'the discourse on civil society', however, the current debate on civil society in general seems to have reached a point of impasse due to two interrelated developments: First, there is the 'division of the contemporary world of social theory between 'skeptics and the faithful': 'those who reject the concept of 'civil society' as a fraud, illusion or as analytically too imprecise to be useful; and those who privilege it as the normative ideal and theoretical pivot of contemporary political philosophy' (Fine, 1997: 7). This split puts a ceiling on the debate and curbs the development of a critical literature on the concept of civil society. Second, despite the variety of conceptualizations of 'civil society', there is an undeniable dominance of the liberal pluralism-and-consensus-oriented approach within the literature rendering the concept highly problematic. Indeed, each of these factors (re)produces and is (re)produced by the other and together they have important repercussions for the fertility of the concept of civil society in Turkey as elsewhere in the world. The dominance of the liberal idea of civil society as the sphere of harmonious pluralism and consensus and as the checking mechanism over the state is the major factor behind its glorification as the normative ideal. This idealization of the notion of civil society in turn is faced with a total rejection of the validity of the concept. This study reflects upon ramifications of this vicious circle from the point of view of Turkish politics by analyzing the discourses of parliamentary parties in Turkey (the ruling Justice and Development Party - AKP, the main opposition Republican People's Party -CHP and two other parties of opposition Nationalist Action Party -MHP and Peace and Democracy Party -BDP). This article first shows how these parties embrace an "idealized and romanticized" idea of civil society especially in terms of the civil society-democracy relationship which is a ramification of the neo-liberal hegemony over the basic concepts of Turkish politics. By focusing on their usage(s) of "civil society" it shows that despite their different ideological stances all the four parliamentary parties share the same ground in conceptualizing civil society as the site of rights, liberties, pluralism and consensus autonomous from the state, a conception inspired by the liberal tradition. In this respect, it is argued in this study that the discourses of these four parties epitomize the vicious circle described above, especially through their formulation of the civil society-democracy relationship. The recurrent themes of this formulation will be highlighted through a reading of the official party documents (party programs and election

manifestos). Second, this study reflects upon the hitches of this widely used romantic vision of civil society and its relation with democracy with resort to the post-Marxist literature on power and antagonism. As a result, it argues that, due to its deficiency in problematizing power relations from the point of view of the disadvantaged, the hegemonic conception of civil society in Turkey is far from having a potential to provide a new horizon in search of solutions to our problems related with the coexistence of difference and equality.

| Party | Year of establishment | Ideology (as stated in official party documents) | % of votes 2002 | Number of seats out of a total 550 (2002) | % of votes 2007 | Number of seats out of a total 550 (2007) |
|-------|-----------------------|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|---|
| AKP   | 2001                  | Conservative democrat                            | 34,4            | 365 (66%)                                 | 46,6            | 341 (62%)                                 |
| CHP   | 1923                  | Kemalist-social democrat                         | 19,4            | 177 (32%)                                 | 20,9            | 112 (20%)                                 |
| MHP   | 1969                  | Nationalist                                      | 8,4             | -   | 14,3            | 71 (13%)                                  |
| BDP   | 2008                  | Leftist  |                 |   |                 |   |

Table 1 Political Parties at the TGNA. The CHP and MHP (like all other existing political parties at the time) were closed down by the military government after the 1980 coup d'état. The CHP was re-opened in 1992 and the MHP in 1993. The BDP became the fourth party in the parliament after the close down of the Democratic Society Party (DSP) in December 2009 by the Constitutional Court with the joining of the DSP members of parliament to the BDP. As a way of bypassing the national threshold, at the 2007 general elections the leading figures of Kurdish movement chose to run as independent candidates and the DSP formed a parliamentary group of 26 after they entered the parliament. The DSP, in turn, had been preceded by the Democratic People's Party which gained 6.1% of the votes staying below the national threshold of 10% at the 2002 general elections.

### **Discourse on Democracy and Civil Society in Turkey**

The polarization between the skeptics and the faithful mentioned above has stemmed mainly from the increasing popularity of civil society during the last decades. In Neera Chandoke's (2007) words, 'although it has become popular across societies of very different levels and across all ideological hues, the notion of civil society has become *confused and*

*confusing.*' As a result, an intimidating view has come to parallel its attractiveness as exemplified by Colas's observation that, '[g]ushing out of everyone's mouth at once, 'civil society' acceded at the end of the 1980s to a sort of empty universality ... it has become a label for all sorts of goods, and in certain cases even a mask for intellectual emptiness, 'civil society' allows people to speak without knowing what they are saying, which in turn helps them to avoid arguing with each other' (1997: 4). Thus, it has become inevitable for those who are interested in the concept of civil society to tackle with the question: 'Is civil society the 'big idea' for the twenty-first century or will the idea of civil society –confused, corrupted or captured by the elites- prove another false horizon in the search for a better world?' (Edwards, 2004: vi). However, this kind of an approach, limiting the alternative ways of handling the concept of civil society with only two, has had an unproductive effect on the literature and hence constitutes the major reason for the vicious circle that seems to be characterizing civil society debate for a while. Claiming that this either/or type of approach itself can be a major factor shrinking the explanatory power of the concept of civil society, this study urges for an alternative approach that views civil society neither as *the telos* nor as an illusion. It claims instead that it is possible to develop a critical view that 'recognizes the validity of the concept of civil society without romanticizing it, without idealizing it, and without abstracting it from its social and historical ground' (Fine, 1997: 7-8). This means to continue to employ the concept as an analytical tool to understand the existing unequal power relations causing exclusion, domination, marginalization and silencing in socio-political life.

Such a critique is in scarcity, however, when at stake is the conception of civil society by the political parties in the Turkish parliament. Rather, these parties commonly embrace 'the idea of civil society as a good thing' (Lewis, 2001: 5) despite significant ideological differences among them. Although the reasons behind the positive value attached to civil society may vary among different political parties, their views are in large part shaped by the neo-liberal idea of civil society as the realm of autonomous and voluntary political activity where the liberal ideal of harmonious pluralism is experienced. This 'faith' in civil society most of the time goes hand in hand with an instrumental approach and with the justification of the value/use/necessity of civil society for another –perhaps superior- purpose. The common tendency among the political parties in Turkey, as a way of justification of the appeal of civil society, is to underline civil society-democracy relationship. In Turkey, as elsewhere in the world, 'democracy' – albeit with various different connotations and denotations- seems to have consolidated itself as the normative ideal within mainstream politics and hence the parliamentary parties in Turkey converge in their adherence to 'the idea of a positive,

universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the political project of building and strengthening democracy around the world' (Lewis, 2001: 4). In that sense, they commonly adhere to the notion of *democracy-serving-civil society* or *democracy-friendly civil society*. As will be discussed later however, this kind of an approach has fatal drawbacks causing the concept of civil society as well as that of democracy to leave certain questions unanswered and even without being asked.

The analysis of civil society-democracy relationship takes different forms according to the ideological positions of political parties at the Turkish parliament. In the case of the ruling AKP, this positive correlation between civil society and democracy is discussed with reference to the notion of 'participatory democracy'; to the correlation between legitimacy and the 'strength of the state'; and to the issue of the 'thorough representation of the national will'. Regarding political participation, the AKP states that 'in a democratic order the rules that are binding upon citizens are to be made by themselves. Hence democracy is a form of government in which the laws represent the consent of the citizens' within a 'mutual interaction between the rulers and the ruled.' Besides, there is an emphasis on the need for a 'transition from representative democracy to participatory democracy in Turkey' (AKP 2001, 2002, 2007) and also on the need for 'widening and deepening of democracy' (AKP, 2007). Civil society is deemed important due to its association with the ideal of political participation. Accordingly, the AKP suggests that 'pluralist and participatory democratic political process will increasingly be opened to civil society organizations as well as to the views and suggestions of different segments within society' (AKP, 2007). Besides, the party considers it 'essential that the political decisions are taken on the basis of the widest possible consultation and consensus' (AKP, 2002, 2007). The AKP also claims that since the laws in a democratic order are expected to be the expression of the 'collective will', they should be formulated in cooperation with civil society organizations (AKP, 2007). Consequently, for the AKP 'those countries with strong civil society are at the same time the countries with a strong democracy. Neither the individuals, nor civil society nor democracy can develop in a country where everything is under the state's control' (AKP, 2007).

Although the AKP justifies the role of civil society for democracy by stressing the correlation between civil society and political participation, it is different from a republican or communitarian notion of active citizenship that conceptualizes political participation as a good in itself. Rather -and ironically enough- the discourse of the AKP tends to value participation for 'strengthening the state'. It is argued that by allowing the functioning of civil societal actors as a checking mechanism over it the state consolidates its legitimacy in the

eyes of the governed whereby it becomes stronger. Thus, the AKP views the empowerment of civil society and an 'efficient public surveillance within the framework of good governance' as necessary conditions for a democratic government (AKP, 2007). The emergence and consolidation of democratic governance, in turn, according to the formulation of the party, will pave the way for a strong state: 'The governments which take their power from the people and civil society organizations will increase their effectiveness in their regions and in the world' (AKP, 2002, 2007). The AKP also refers to 'universal standards and norms' used to compare life qualities of the people in different countries as well as the effectiveness and the prestige of the states in the international arena (AKP, 2002). These universal criteria according to the AKP call for a delimitation of the state's sphere of action and an increase in the effectiveness of the private sector and civil society organizations (AKP, 2002). As can be seen, the AKP's understanding is built first upon a state-civil society distinction according to which civil society is to function both as a checking mechanism over the state and as a means to consolidate the state's authority and second on the idealization of civil society as the realm where the pluralities are represented through active citizen participation.

The main opposition party, the CHP, shares the same ground with the AKP in idealizing civil society for its positive role in democratization. In a parallel line of thinking, the significance of civil society is explained with reference to individual rights and freedoms related with the ideal of political participation. Indeed, the party takes the notion of 'free individual [as] the main ingredient of democracy' as its starting point and states that a major consideration of the party is that of assuring the 'conscious exercise of individual freedoms' (CHP, 2009). It is also underlined that the CHP is against limitations on the participation of different groups in the society since these eventually would lead to alienation of the people from political parties and politics in general (CHP, 2009). Hence, the party program states that 'the democratic right to associate' and 'participatory, organized and strong society' are all among its highest priorities. Again similar to the discourse employed by the AKP, the CHP emphasizes the significance of pluralism and thus views the freedom of expression as the essence of plural democracy (CHP, 2007). Consequently, the positive role of civil society stems from, according to the CHP, its potential to provide a living space to the pluralities and to give a voice to them. Civil society is again viewed as the realm of rights and liberties, the realm of voluntary activism outside the direct control of the state and as a means to democratic consolidation. This is the reason why the party claims that 'free individuals and civil society organizations should be given the opportunity to participate into all steps of decision making-processes' (CHP, 2009). The CHP also suggests that a Civil Society

Coordination Council is to be founded in order to realize the cooperation between state and civil society (CHP, 2009). The major objectives of the party include encouraging associational life in civil society (CHP, 2009, 2007)., widening the prospects for political participation and eliminating all –administrative and legal- obstacles on the right to associate (CHP, 2007). It is claimed that strong CSOs is the motor of democratic development (CHP, 2007). Consequently, the emphasis on political participation with a perspective on voluntarism, pluralism, the free exercise of individual rights and liberties is at the core of the discourses of the two leading political parties in Turkey. What in a sense differentiates the discourse of the social-democrat CHP from the conservative-democrat AKP is the reference to the notion of ‘solidarity’ in relation with the idea of associational life. According to the CHP solidarity is reinforced and activated by the participation of the people in a highly organized civil society (CHP, 2009). In both cases, however, there is a consensual view of politics.

The MHP is another opposition party in the TGNA and its discourse on civil society resembles those of AKP and CHP in that the notion of political participation is at the center of its approach to the democracy-civil society relationship. However, the way the MHP conceptualizes political participation diverges from the AKP and CHP due to its over-emphasis on the notion of societal (read as national) consensus. Indeed, similar to the AKP’s reference to the strong state, the starting point of the MHP is the hardships facing Turkey in the age of global competition (MHP, 2009). The party suggests that in order to be the ‘leader country’ of the 21th century Turkey has to start ‘a great leap forward’ in socio-economic terms which in turn requires a ‘mentality shift’ at the societal level (MHP, 2009). This great leap forward is to be supported enthusiastically by the society with all its institutions and segments (MHP, 2009). Accordingly, it is stated that there is a need for ‘dialogue and togetherness in economic, social and political realms and between administrative cadres, different segments of society, political actors and the people’ (MHP, 2009). Unless a culture of consensus is created among these actors it is impossible for the country to respond to the challenge of the time (MHP, 2009). The creation of ‘a societal consensus both on the fundamental national and humanitarian values and on a national vision and objectives’, as well as ‘union on the most vital issues’ will pave the way for cooperation in carrying out the plans and programs for a better future for Turkey (MHP, 2009). This idea of societal consensus, in turn, has social, political and economic dimensions and civil society is attributed a special role in the creation of this consensus in that through civil society organizations views from different social groups and the people will be taken into account in

the process of formulating the best solutions. Related with this obsession with the idea of consensus, the party defines politics as ‘a way of developing policies aiming at the comfort and prosperity of the nation’ (MHP, 2007). It calls for a new understanding of politics which is to be ‘built upon cuddling of shared values instead of quarrel aiming at affection, fraternity and unity’ (MHP, 2007). In that respect, the party calls for ‘political participation with a high national, moral and social sensitivity’ (MHP, 2007). In a similar manner, while democracy is defined as the coexistence of different opinions within the framework of fraternity and mutual respect (MHP, 2009) the party sees a failure in creating a consensus out of these differences at the social, political and economic realms as waste of time for Turkey (MHP, 2007). A ‘unity of objectives’ is to be created; ‘self-sacrifice and altruism is to be praised against egoism and smugness’ for the social transformation mentioned above to take place (MHP, 2007). For the MHP, then, civil society is instrumental in creating the societal consensus, the notion that is at the heart of the conceptualization of democracy, civil society and politics relationship.

The program of the BDP, revised in February 2010, is also characterized by an emphasis on democracy. It starts with a reference to ‘the urgent need [for] comprehensive and real democratization’ in Turkey. Civil society is once more associated with the ideal of engaged citizenry, active participation and pluralism. The party underlines the significance of simultaneous democratization of the state and the system of government, of the society and of politics. What is required for a democratic government is that it should be ‘the society’ that takes fundamental decisions regarding the future of the country as well as regarding the state apparatuses to implement those decisions. In order for this to take place, according to the formulation of the party, the democratization of the society is a must and it can only be achieved through the existence of ‘different identities and cultures, political structures and ideas’ and by ‘embracing all differences and colors’. For a ‘real’ and ‘enduring’ peace in the society ‘pluralism based upon multiculturalism’ is to be taken as the basic principle. These are of utmost importance for the development of participatory democracy. Different segments of the society should be able to represent themselves at the state level. Democratization of the state, then, ‘is to be built upon the concepts of political-organized-free society, civil society, individual and citizen.’ Accordingly, the citizen has a ‘double role’ to play: to give legitimacy to politics as an institution and participate effectively in the processes of political decision making and implementation through organizations. The citizen, then, is ‘both the primary constituent and the shareholder of the state.’ Hence, the party stresses the ‘active participation of civil society organizations and democratic mass organizations’ at all levels. They are functional for ‘interaction and organized communication’ between the citizens and the state.

Besides, the BDP program also underlines the need to delimit the state since increasing the power and authority of the state rendering it a huge organization leads to the repression of the society by the state. What is needed in that sense is a ‘politically reduced state as an instrument of service and cooperation’ whose social character, however, is to be strengthened. The BDP criticizes other political parties in the country for prioritizing the state and political power at the expense of ‘free individual and democratic society’ and hence finds them unable to find solutions to the deeply seated problems of the country. According to the BDP, ‘today in Turkey there is a tradition of ‘state parties’ which are different from each other in appearance but very similar in political terms.’ The party states its intention to be the initiator of a ‘new political culture and style’ in Turkish politics. In terms of its conceptualization of civil society-democracy relationship, however, the BDP is much in line with the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse. The dynamics of the civil society is mentioned within the framework of individual rights and liberties, autonomy from the state, pluralism and political participation.

To sum up, the above analysis shows that despite their different ideological standpoints the four political parties at the TGNA have much in common in terms of their approach to the notion of civil society. In the first place, they converge in attributing a positive value to civil society per se and thus they all position themselves among ‘the faithful’ in terms of the polarization mentioned at the beginning. Second, this faith in civil society in each case has its roots in a particular understanding of civil society-democracy relationship in which democracy is thought as a positive function of civil society. Thus, the political parties in question commonly employ the idea of a *democracy-friendly civil society*. In this formulation civil society is thought as a political object in and of itself having the key to the gateway to democracy. Third, this role of civil society for democratization is explained by the parties with reference to its potential as the site of active citizen participation, individual rights and liberties, harmonious coexistence of pluralisms, and to its functioning as a checking mechanism over the state. This is an implication of the dominance of the liberal conception of civil society, whose classic formulation is usually taken back to the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, at the expense of other conceptualizations.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the intersection of the approaches of four political parties, claiming to represent rival ideologies, is an indication of one dominant view over the concept of civil society.

It is an interesting finding that four political parties, which cannot be said to have a notable record of cooperation caused largely by their ideological differences, display considerable similarity in terms of their approach toward the notion of civil society. In what follows we will reflect on the consequences of this ‘alliance’ for the fertility of the discourse

on civil society. This can be done by trying to uncover the two major flaws of this hegemonic approach. One flaw is related with the identification of the notion of civil society with those of pluralism and consensus. As was shown above, the discourses of political parties in Turkey are characterized by the underlying assumption that the differences within civil society would “accommodate each other” in the sense of the classic formulation of Alexis de Tocqueville. However, the liberal idea of civil society embraced so enthusiastically by the Turkish mainstream politics<sup>2</sup> has an important failing related with the ‘liberal idea of pluralism without antagonism’ (Mouffe, 2000: 20). Another flaw of the hegemonic approach is related with the idea of ‘democracy-serving civil society’. A critique of these failings of the dominant usages of ‘civil society’ is now in order for clarifying the claim that the discourse employed by the leading actors of Turkish politics is far from rendering it a creative and dynamic concept. This discussion is important because at any rate political parties and their leading figures, due to their functions in terms of political socialization and political communication, are –at least for the time being- the most important political actors in Turkey as well as in any other country. In that sense, how they cover a political question (in this case civil society-democracy relationship) plays the most important role in shaping the political environment.

### **Pluralism, Participation, Consensus and Civil Society: Too Good to be True?**

The promise of participation of all pluralities which is a central theme in the formal discourses of political parties, may be problematic at the practical level when we face the question ‘[i]s it fair and just?’ (Chandoke, 2007: 4). This amounts to say that there is a need to integrate into the debate on civil society a consciousness that it is not simply the realm of caring, mutual support, cooperation, consensus, or civic virtues as the majority of contemporary theorists of civil society and the main actors in Turkish politics tend to propose. In many cases its ‘microworlds’ (Hall, 1996) include exclusion, exploitation, oppression and marginalization.

In that respect, ‘what is needed is a more vigorous engagement with its [civil society] potentially destructive aspects ...’ (Chandoke, 2007: 5). Although this task is central to the Marxist conception of civil society the hegemonic neo-liberal idea of civil society is built upon an idealized, romanticized vision of civil society. This has a lot to do with the state-civil society dichotomy, a central theme of the latter. The state in this perspective has to be checked by ‘the civil society’ which supposedly- indeed by definition in the liberal tradition- implies an autonomous sphere of action outside the state characterized by the free exercise of

individual and group rights. However, this state-civil society dichotomy ending up with the idealization of the latter misses out the uneven power relations and conflicts *within* civil society on the one hand, and the interconnectedness of state and civil society on the other hand.

This engagement with the potentially destructive aspects of civil society in the sense of ‘the uneven power relations in society’ as well as an effort to deconstruct the state-civil society distinction is central to the Marxist idea of civil society. Marx’s political economy oriented challenge draws attention to the economic relations and class struggle as the most determining features of civil society and to the state as the site where these relations are reflected. Gramsci’s contribution to Marx’s conception of civil society in turn is that of adding the dimension of hegemony (i.e. the intellectual and moral leadership). He refers to civil society and the state as two superstructural levels and connects both of them with economic relations. He sees civil society as the realm where the ideological struggle for hegemony takes place and considers hegemony and economic power as inseparable conditions of becoming a state. This means that rather than being conceived as the realm of individual rights and liberties, initiative, autonomous activity, voluntariness, civic friendship, solidarity and the like, civil society (and the state) is thought to represent certain forms of class relations. In other words, there is a power, struggle and conflict oriented perspective necessary for a thorough understanding of what is going on in the civil society.

The path opened by Marx and Gramsci, takes us to the critical view on the notion of civil society that was mentioned above. This line of thinking, rather than the hegemonic neo-liberal romanticized and idealized view of civil society, is functional in analyzing and understanding what is really going on within civil society. As Ehrenberg argues,

What civil society ‘is’ can be grasped only by looking carefully at what its constituent structures do, how they are organized, and what political and economic forces are at work – no matter how strenuously some theorists try to describe it as an autonomous sphere of democratic activity. In this sense, civil society is really a heuristic device, a theoretical guide that can reveal important matters of social life but cannot adequately be described in and of itself ( 1999: 235).

The notion of antagonism, as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe is also in line with this critical view on civil society (1985: 124-25). According to them approach antagonism is in a sense the building block, the constitutive element of all kinds of subject positions. In other words, all subject positions are constituted within and through antagonism. This, in turn leads to the case that the constitution of identities are never fully-developed and fully-completed. In

that respect antagonism is different from real opposition or contradiction (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 124). Opposition or contradiction converge in ‘the fact of being *objective relations*’ according to which opposition is an objective relation between real objects and a contradiction is an objective relation between conceptual objects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 124). That is to say, ‘...it is something that the objects *already are* which makes the relation intelligible. That is in both cases we are concerned with full identities. In the case of contradiction, it is because A *is fully* A that being-not-A is a contradiction - and therefore an impossibility. In the case of real opposition, it is because A is also fully A that its relation with B produces an objectively determinable effect’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 124-25, *emphases original*). In the case of antagonism the situation is different: ‘...the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution... (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 125). Insofar as there is antagonism I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence: its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as full positivity’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 125). It is possible to get two inferences from such a conceptualization of antagonism. First, it is clear that since antagonism is present at the constitution of subject positions and identities it is not something erasable. Antagonism is internal to and constitutive of all subject positions and hence a consensual view on socio-political relations is fallacious. Second, as was explained in the quotation, antagonism prevents the subject positions from becoming fully-developed. The subject positions are not completed, open to change and hence contingent. This, in turn means that these subject positions cannot constitute themselves as ‘objective realities’ and they cannot be defined, determined and fixed objectively unlike the case of an opposition or contradiction’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 125).

This belief in the ever-presence of antagonism as constitutive of all kinds of identities, the non-fixity of subject positions and hence the impossibility of consensus in turn is closely associated with a second presumption, i.e. the claim that the tension between equality and liberty cannot be reconciled and that *there can only be contingent hegemonic forms of stabilization of their conflict* (Mouffe, 2000: 5). Each time this kind of a contingent hegemonic stabilization takes place, it happens at the expense of some form of exclusion: ‘We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion’ (Mouffe, 2000: 104).

Consequently, what is required is ‘coming to terms with the hegemonic nature of social relations and identities’ (Mouffe, 2000: 105). This in turn means arguing strongly against the ‘liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism’ because the latter prevents us from recognizing how certain differences are structured as relations of power (Mouffe, 2000: 20). By taking into account the insistence on ‘acknowledging the permanence of conflict and antagonism’ (Mouffe, 1993: 8) the critical idea of civil society can become a means of shedding light on the true nature of the relationships characterizing civil society radically different from the consensus oriented perspective. In that way, it can be possible to fight against the ‘mistaken emphasis on consensus’ (Mouffe, 2000: 7). The task of the concept of civil society should rather be to make us reflect on webs of power relations within which these identities and subject positions are formed (and re-formed). Hence, it is important to stress that ‘if participation is to mean anything, it will challenge existing power relations and will bring about conflict: the absence of conflict in many participatory programmes is something that should raise our suspicions’ (Pearce, 2005: 6).

What is outlined above is a conception of democratic politics on the basis of relations of power drawing attention to the fact that ‘some existing rights have been constructed on the very exclusion or subordination of others’ (Mouffe, 2000: 20). Hence, ‘to aim at a universal rational consensus [is] the real threat to democracy. Indeed this can lead to violence being unrecognized and hidden behind appeals to ‘rationality’ as is often the case in liberal thinking which disguises the necessary frontiers and forms of exclusion behind pretences of ‘neutrality’ (Mouffe, 2000: 22). Consequently, this view challenges the ‘liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism’ and provides a useful guide to make sense of the concept of civil society without staying within the confines of the hegemonic view. More specifically, through such a perspective civil society becomes a concept that can be functional in grasping ‘the present hegemonic configuration’ (Mouffe, 2000: 6) in order to be able to struggle against it and envision and develop an alternative to it. Hence, in order for a transformation to take place that configuration has to be made discernible: *‘Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation’* (Mouffe, 2000: 33-34). This is vital for a critical idea of civil society which at the same time underlines the interconnectedness of the state and civil society: ‘The uneven power relations in society are reflected at the level of the state, influencing what groups have access and have their interests protected and promoted and what are groups are marginalized, victimized and repressed. State institutions are formed and transformed in the context of such struggles... The struggles are

fought out within the institutions of the state as well as in the organizations of civil society...'(Beckman, 1997: 3).

Approaching pluralism from the perspective of power, antagonism and exclusion in short from the perspective of hegemony; hence underlining the insufficiency of underlining the autonomy of this sphere of life from the state; its basic principles as those of voluntariness, active citizenship, self-governing of the society, pluralism, dialogue, communication, toleration, friendship, articulation of the particular and the universality and so on paves the way to a particular understanding of democratic politics as an 'unending process.' Rather than staying within the confines of 'democracy-friendly-civil society' type of analysis, this approach calls for a concern with *democracy within the civil society* and hence *democracy within the state*. In other words, there is a challenge to the perspective that sees democracy as an end to be achieved by satisfying certain institutional requirements to the perspective that views civil society as one of those 'ingredients' of democracy. Proceeding within the framework of liberal democracy this approach to the civil society-democracy relationship envisages a democratic way of life which is composed of (i) the 'neutral', 'referee' or the 'night watchman' state outside and above all conflicts of interests, identities, and classes; (ii) the 'rule of law' which protects individual rights and liberties and endows each individual with the same/equal legal and political rights and hence with equal chance of making their voice heard; and (iii) a vibrant civil society i.e. an active and plural realm of social-political movements and/or organizations which are neither founded by nor are under the control of state but have an aim of influencing and scrutinizing the state and its activities through political participation. It is presumed in this scheme that once these conditions are fulfilled there is/will be 'democracy' in a certain context. Yet, there is a fatal drawback in this approach: it is built upon the presupposition that takes democracy as something external to those 'ingredients' and conditions; democracy is envisioned as standing alone at some 'higher' place waiting to be reached and acquired through satisfaction of these conditions. However, democracy should be viewed as integral to all these processes, i.e. to the workings of the state structure, to the denotations and connotations of the concept of rule of law and to the realm of civil society. No one of these concepts has a universal, fixed content. Adapting Ehrenberg's claim one can argue that what the state/rule of law/civil society 'is' can only be grasped by looking carefully at what its constituent structures do, how they are organized, and what political and economic forces are at work. Hence there is or can be no state/rule of law/civil society that 'serves' democracy; there is or can be only a democratic state/democratic rule of law/democratic civil society. The latter in turn is possible only

through integrating the point of view of the disadvantaged/the excluded/the marginalized. This stance requires a constant attentiveness, concern and awareness of the power relations and their changing configurations, as well as their reflection at the state level. In the case of the leading four parties of Turkish politics, however, civil society is commonly idealized as the sphere of harmonious pluralism, rights and liberties and active citizen participation. Moreover, their discourses take the liberal state- civil society distinction as their starting point at the expense of missing out the interconnectedness and permeability between the two. The most obvious example to this interrelationship has been the Kemalist NGOs (Erdoğan, 2000). Their discourses and actions, especially from the mid-1990s onwards, symbolized a response to new challenges to the official ideology of the state, not merely in the form of a reproduction of the official ideology but in the form of a re-articulation on the face of new social dynamics (Erdoğan, 2000).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study has started as a project whose aim is to make a comparative analysis of the approaches of the four political parties at the Turkish parliament (AKP, CHP, MHP and BDP) towards the concept of civil society. In the end, however, its major finding has been that there is much more similarities than difference in the way these parties conceptualize civil society. This is an interesting finding and it is quite ironic since these parties normally find it very hard to unite around shared aims or a common worldview. However, this study does not take this affinity as something encouraging for the future of the socio-political life in Turkey. This is due to crucial drawbacks and/or shortcomings of the liberal idea of civil society which seems to have been embraced enthusiastically by the four political parties. On the basis of these drawbacks this study concludes with certain suggestions on a critical idea of civil society which is expected to be more helpful for a thorough understanding of the dynamics of socio-political life in Turkey. First, in the last instance civil society is a sphere of life where individuals experience the complex web of interwoven power relations. So, the concept of civil society should serve as the analytical tool to bring these relations to the forefront, to highlight them, to make them visible and hence to make them contestable rather than serving to consolidate the illusion that differences leading to inequalities are not important. The continuous reproduction of the idea of civil society as the sphere of right and liberties is a major obstacle on the way of such an understanding. Second, this emphasis on power and antagonism should bring with itself a reflection on the idea of ‘democratic civil society’ which is radically different from ‘democracy-friendly-civil society’ or democracy-serving

civil society. Democracy is something that has a direct relationship to our ways of thinking, struggles and solutions regarding the issues, concerns and questions of the present as well as of the future. Hence, when the two concepts, civil society and democracy, are brought together it should motivate us to think of a democratic civil society. This in turn is possible only through an understanding of the point of view of the disadvantaged or the subordinated. This is a requirement both for analyzing the socio-political reality and for envisaging a socio-political ideal; so it needs to be taken into consideration especially by the political parties which have a claim in both. Third, the ontological distinction between the state and civil society, a central theme in political party discourses in Turkey, needs to be questioned. A critical view on the concept of civil society will be able to highlight that the two are not two distinct and autonomous entities. Both are characterized by conflicts and power relations and those characterizing civil society are also reflected at the state. These points are suggested as a possible critical reading of the idea of civil society and are thought to provide a new opening to the concept which has found itself in a bottleneck as a result of the reproduction of the same themes within a hegemonic (liberal) approach. Unless such an opening is provided to itself, the concept of civil society will fall short of providing a new opening for the analysis of political life in Turkey. However, considered their discourses on civil society, the four political parties at the parliament -being the most influential political actors in Turkey- are far and away from showing signs of such awareness.

## END NOTES

\*Assit. Prof., Baskent University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>1</sup>By the virtue of being one of the much contested concepts in sociopolitical thought civil society has been defined in several different ways. One can cite among others the liberal, republican, Hegelian, communitarian and Marxist conceptualizations..

<sup>2</sup> The academic literature on civil society in Turkey is also characterized by the hegemony of the liberal conception of civil society.

## REFERENCES

BECKMAN, B. (1997), 'Explaining Democratization: Notes on the Concept of Civil Society', *Civil Society, Democracy and the Muslim World*, eds. Elizabeth Özdalga and Sune Persson, İstanbul: The Swedish Research Institute.

CHANDOKE, N. (2007), 'What the Hell is "Civil Society"?', [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net). Retrieved on 25.01.2007.

COHEN, J. & ANDREW, A. (1992), *Civil Society and Political Theory*,(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

EDWARDS, M. (2004), *Civil Society*, Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press.

ERDOĐAN, N. (2000), "'Kalpaksız Kuvvacılar': Kemalist Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları", *Türkiye'de Sivil Toplum ve Milliyetçilik*, eds. Yerasimos S., Seufert G, Vorhoff K., İstanbul: İletişim

FINE, R. (1997), 'Civil Society Theory, Enlightenment and Critique', *Civil Society Democratic Perspectives*, ed. Robert Fine and Shirin Rai, London: Frank Cass.

HALL, S. (1996), 'The Meaning of New Times', *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, London: Routledge.

HOWELL, J. and PEARCE, J. (2001), *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* , London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

AKP (2001), Party Program.

AKP (2002), General Elections Manifesto.

AKP (2007), General Elections Manifesto.

JENSEN, J. & FERENC, M. (2005), 'The Languages of Civil Society - Europe and Beyond', European University Institute Working Paper SPS No. 2005/2, May 2005. [www.iue.it](http://www.iue.it).

LACLAU, E. & CHANTAL, M. (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, New York: Verso.

---

LEWIS, D. (2001), 'Civil Society in non-Western contexts: Reflections on the 'usefulness' of a concept, LSE Civil Society Working Paper.

MOUFFE, C. (1993), *Return of the Political*, London, New York: Verso.

MOUFFE, C. (2000), *The Democratic Paradox*, London, New York: Verso.

MHP (2009), Party Program.

MHP (2007), General Elections Manifesto.

NAIDOO, K. & RAJESH, T. (1999), 'The Promise of Civil Society', *Civil Society at the Milleniu ed. CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation*, Westhartford: Kumarian Press.

CHP (2009), Party Program.

CHP (2002), General Elections Manifesto.