

# DEMOCRATIC LEFT: THE LEADING DISCOURSE OF THE 1970S IN TURKEY

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## ABSTRACT

As the leading actor of the Democratic Left movement, Bülent Ecevit emerged in the Republican People's Party (CHP). Firstly, he became the leader of the CHP and then came to power in the Republic of Turkey in a short time. However, his power struggles both within his party and in Turkey was formidable. The first protuberant in his way through accessing the power was a historical personality, that is İsmet İnönü. He was the leader of the CHP when Ecevit initiated the challenge. This paper aimed to analyse the elements of Ecevit's ideological discourse in the 1970s within the confines of arguments concerning Mithat Paşaa, Kemalism, and Marxism. In the first part, the contribution of Mithat Paşa, a moderniser in the Ottoman Empire during Abdulhamid II's reign, to Ecevit's movement was evaluated. Then, the relationship between Kemalism and Ecevit's Democratic Left was discussed. In the last part, the differences and similarities between Ecevit's leftist outlook and Marxism were identified. In the conclusion part, there was a general assessment of Ecevit and his discourse.

**Keywords:** Bülent Ecevit, Democratic Left, CHP, İsmet İnönü, Kemalism

## INTRODUCTION

Bülent Ecevit (1925-2006) was among the most significant figures in the contemporary Turkish political scene. As the leading actor of a movement, Ecevit emerged in the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) formulated a discourse, namely, the Democratic Left. He came to power first in the CHP and then in a short time in the Republic of Turkey. However, his power struggles both within his party and in Turkey was formidable. The first protuberant in his way through accessing the power was a historical personality, that is İsmet İnönü or known as İsmet Paşa with reference to his position during the National Struggle era. İsmet Paşa was the leader of the CHP when Ecevit and his followers initiated the challenge. As İnönü put it, "either him or me", the contestation had two sides: On the one side there was a hero of National Independence War and Atatürk's companion İnönü, and on the other side there was a young but determined, rebellious but confidential rhetorician Ecevit. Maybe Ecevit's other most challenging "drawback" was the etiquette of his movement, that is, the "left". This label was associated with communism, with which the Turkish people had been horrified since the early republican period. The third challenge was the deep-rooted and ingrained CHP tradition, namely Kemalism. Ecevit confronted the internal ideological dynamics of the CHP in the way to the formulation of leftist discourse. However, the eventual triumphant was Ecevit. This paper aims to analyse the elements of Ecevit's ideological discourse in the 1970s within the confines of arguments concerning Mithat Paşa, Kemalism, and Marxism.

In the first part, the contribution of Mithat Paşa, a moderniser in the Ottoman Empire during Abdulhamid II's reign, to Ecevit's movement is evaluated. Then, the relationship between Kemalism and Ecevit's Democratic Left is discussed. In the last part, the differences and

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similarities between Ecevit's leftist outlook and Marxism are identified. In the conclusion part, there is a general assessment of Ecevit and his discourse.

## **EFFORTS OF LINKING TO THE OTTOMAN MODERNISATION**

Democratic Left is the name of a movement peculiar to Turkey which is established and theorised by Bülent Ecevit, having its roots in the struggle given for the workers' rights in the 1960s; aiming at improving conditions of the peasantry, economic-political power and welfare of the people; and thus realising democracy in every aspect of social, political and economic life. While the emergence of the Democratic Left movement dates back to Ecevit's efforts to enact laws that activated the right to strike and collective bargaining for workers as the Minister of Work in 1963, the historical background of the movement is seen in the late nineteenth century Ottoman-Turkish modernisation. Ecevit (2005, pp. 15-23) connects his movement and intentions towards democracy and improving peasants' conditions in the late Ottoman and early Republican eras and the 1940s. In this context, Ecevit presents Mithat Paşa as the prominent figure in the late Ottoman modernisation: Mithat Paşa was the only statesman who attached essential importance to the economy and people's organisation among the Ottoman reformers. For this reason, Mithat Paşa is not only one of the initiators of economic structural change and the democratisation process, but also he can be counted as the pioneer of social democracy (Ecevit, 1993, p. 1).

Realising peasants' rights, new agricultural tax system, land reform, establishing producers' cooperatives, infrastructural investments are the examples of Mithat Paşa's practices towards economic-structural change that could not be implemented in Anatolia, but in the Balkans and Iraq, during his governorships (Ecevit, 2005, p. 16). According to Ecevit, Mithat Paşa was the initiator of Democratic Left principles such as "development starting from peasant" (*köylüden başlayan kalkınma*), and togetherness of industrialisation and agricultural growth a hundred years earlier than his movement. Moreover, Ecevit (1993, pp. 10-11) says that he was inspired by Mithat Paşa's "Şehirköy" (Pirot) -the first agricultural credit cooperative in Yugoslavia- in formulating his project known as "köy-kent". Hence, Ecevit perceives Mithat Paşa's practices outside Anatolia, Atatürk's intention regarding the necessity of land reform, İsmet İnönü's movement of village institutes and finally his own attempts as the phases of the very same process. However, the common point in all these attempts and intentions is that they did not find fruitful ground in Turkey. Their intentions have never been realised in a total sense.

## **KEMALISM: THE ROOT OR A VERY DISTANT RELATIVE?**

If it is worth counting Mithat Paşa as a source for the Democratic Left movement and its leader's discourse, this movement's other and perhaps the most crucial grassroots was Kemalism. Although there is no consensus on the right concept to define it, the founding principles of the CHP and its one-party rule period are referred to as "Kemalism", which Ecevit refrains from using. The six arrows of CHP –republicanism, nationalism, populism, etatism, secularism and revolutionism- have always defined the contours of CHP politics. In this sense, it could be easily argued that Ecevit's Democratic Left movement is affected by this tradition to a large extent. Nevertheless, how Ecevit rearticulated Kemalist principles to his ideology is complex, contradictory, and imperative. In his redefinition of the Kemalist principles, Ecevit interpreted them in a different and sometimes opposite way. Before the elaboration on the examples, it would not be unjust to argue that some concepts are elastically used in politics. The transformation of CHP tradition under Ecevit's leadership presents apparent examples of this.

### **Populism: Continuation or fork in the road?**

The most obvious and drastic change is observed in the “populism” of the CHP. Both Niyazi Berkes (2005, p. 503) and Kemal Karpat (1991, p. 54) emphasise the term “people’s sovereignty” or “national sovereignty” as an indicator of adherence to populism in the early republican era. However, Karpat (1991, p. 47) acknowledges that the new republican government’s “Programme for Populism” is an “intervention from above.” In this respect, Ecevit’s new stance (for the people, by the people) aims at transforming the elitist notion of the CHP (for the people, despite the people). Şevket Süreyya Aydemir (1971, p. 39) argued that the spirit of the CHP Programme had been “for the people, despite the people” as the real populism, and he perceived the principle of “for the people, by the people” as a new formula but not the real populism. Since it involves two contradictory stances concerning populism, this example is very justificative for the argument of Laclau (1977, 143) that populism is an elusive and recurrent concept.

There is also another dimension of the discussion on populism in the context of CHP: classes. Ecevit (1968, p. 98) asserted that the new stance of CHP –i.e. left-of-centre- is a democratic, peaceful and populist way of reducing the profundity of class struggle. As Necmi Erdoğan (1998, p. 27) puts it, Ecevit’s Democratic Left movement showed a break with the classical Kemalist discourse, not recognising social classes and antagonisms. With Ecevit’s coming to CHP leadership, the party faced a shift in its electoral base from an elitist coalition to a class-based alignment (Tachau, 1991, p. 99). For Erdoğan (1998, p. 29), Ecevit’s success in gathering great mass support while adhering to left politics and presenting Kemalism as a hegemonic project made his discourse an exception. However, the primary motive of Ecevit’s hegemony project was not Kemalism. It was a people/power bloc antagonism having class context, and this was a standard feature, for example, in most of the Latin American populist discourses. It may appear as an exception in the Turkish political scene, but not on a global scale. Laclau (1977, p. 196) rightfully argues that “Classes cannot assert their hegemony without articulating the people in their discourse; and the specific form of this articulation in the case of a class which seeks to confront the power bloc as a whole, in order to assert its hegemony, will be populism.” Following Laclau’s line of argument, populism was the hegemony project of Ecevit and articulation of “the people” does not necessarily exclude the class nature of the discourse. In this context, Ecevit (1975a, p. 9) says:

The ones, who perceive themselves as privileged, think that it is necessary to have privileges that others cannot benefit from or already got those privileges and use them to take imbalanced share from surplus-value of labour or can acquire power further than the equality principle of democracy, putting their power into the conduct of society excessively, are out of the concept of “the people”. To a large extent, the people are the totality of humans who are in a position to earn their livings by physical and intellectual labour; and have no possibility to bring their power into the society and to govern the state sufficiently with the opportunities they have on their own.

The quotation above clearly shows how antagonism is attached to the discourse of Ecevit. To further the discussion, we can refer to Korkut Boratav’s argument. For Boratav (1983, p. 7), “populism illuminates the connections between political regime and economy polity that is aimed at relations of redistribution.” Hence, we can easily argue that the CHP during the one-party rule had no redistribution policy since there was no aim to extend the domestic market. However, in Ecevit’s Democratic Left movement, the populist hegemony project was completed with a political economy in which “the people” is placed at the heart of the economy. In the 1976 Programme of CHP (p. 88), it was stated that “the people’s sector” would be in a prior position concerning state support and also would be the strongest sector of the economy. In addition, the aim of this sector was presented as such: “preventing the concentration of the

economic power and political power resulting from economic power in the hands of the state or limited segments of society” (CHP, 1976, p. 88). It is evident that the diffusion of capital to the base was thought to be realised by the people’s sector. In this sense, by following Boratav’s approach, in which he perceives the period between 1962-1976 as “populist” period since there was a redistribution policy, we reach the point that the CHP during the one-party regime was not “populist”.

### **Nationalism: internal or external dimension?**

The second dimension that needs elaboration is the “nationalism” of Ecevit’s discourse in relation to Kemalism. Ecevit rearticulated Kemalist nationalism. Having an inclusionary national identity conception, emphasis on complete independence in political and economic senses, firm adherence to national interests and pride were components of such nationalism. The most apparent component in Ecevit’s discourse in the 70s was economic nationalism. Ecevit (1975b, p. 6) says, “Nationalism in Democratic Left sense requires, also, nationalism in the economic field; it is against external exploitation, as well as internal exploitation.” His arguments were in line with most of the scholars of dependency school. Hence, it could be argued that his views resembled third world nationalism. In his speeches, he usually referred to Latin American societies and dependent economic relations. However, replacing the dependency school’s argument of “de-linking to socialism” with the argument of “national independence” made Ecevit’s discourse closer to that of the “Kadro” movement of the 1930s in certain respects (Konuralp, 2009; 2013). We should note that Haldun Gülalp (1998) argues that the *Kadro* movement proposed similar ideas like dependency school decades before A. G. Frank. The main difference was *Kadro*’s adherence to national revolution rather than de-linking to socialism. Another aspect of Ecevit’s nationalism is, naming his discourse as “national” due to leaning on the realities of Turkey (CHP, 1969, p. 133). This point also resembles some ideas of scholars of the late dependency school. For example, Brazilian scholar Cardoso (1982) marks differences and distinct realities among dependent societies with his famous catchword: diversity within unity.

### **Etatism: an outworn policy or an ideological element?**

The third Kemalist principle was etatism that underwent a change. As Karpat (1991, p. 56) puts it, “Etatism provided the CHP with a powerful instrument for the reinforcement of its policy of cultural reform as it gave the government extraordinary leverage over the economy” in the one-party regime and also, “(it) became the most important of the six (arrows) and served as the doctrinal basis for the increases in the government and party authority.” Nevertheless, Ecevit was against that kind of doctrine. He (1993, p. 71) announced his agreement with Professor Karpat’s argument that Turkish etatism was not a thoroughly established theory but a practical one that emerged from events. Ecevit (1993, p. 80) says that in the 1960s and 70s, there were some attempts in the left thinking to identify left and progressiveness with etatism, and he labels all these trends as “outworn”. In the 60s, the attempters to make etatism doctrinaire and to place it on ideological grounds were gathered in the periodical “Yön” like the “Kadro” movement of the 1930s (Ecevit, 1993, p. 80). In the first issue of “Yön”, in December 1960, there was the declaration of etatism which was signed by thousands of people. However, Ecevit did not sign it and wrote his counter article in the following issue of “Yön”. In 1970, Ecevit (1975b, p. 8) drew the lines of new etatism as such:

Progressive left understanding of our time does not reject etatism but gives it a new meaning different from the old one. In this sense of etatism, the state prevents the persons from oppressing; exploiting the people, but it does not take the place of the persons who oppress and exploit the people. In this sense of etatism, the state does not become the possessor of everything at all costs but steers the whole economy with its public and private sectors for the benefit of the people. In

this sense of etatism, the state does not break off the people. It becomes a united whole with the people.

Hence, Ecevit (1975a, p. 30) rejects the term “papa state”, which is widely used in Turkish politics and replaces it with “dutiful child state”, meaning a state in the service of the people.

### **Revolutionism: from above or with the social base?**

Tachau (1991, p. 104) quotes from İlkay Sunar that “The CHP elite were revolutionary in culture and ideology but essentially conservative in economic and social policy.” For Bülent Ecevit (1973, p. 17), the reforms in the one-party rule associated with cultural, ideological and political levels consisted of superstructural revolution and these were a concrete phase of reforms. To make the concrete reforms living, there was the need for permanent revolutionary ruptures, and with these ruptures, an infrastructural revolution –to reorganise relations of production- could be accomplished, which constituted the abstract dimension of the Atatürk revolution (Ecevit, 1973, pp. 18-20). The CHP’s *Programme for Change of Order* was declared in 1969 while Ecevit was the party’s secretary-general, and in this programme, the need for infrastructural revolution was identified apparently. The reason for the delay of such a revolution was addressed as such: conservative segments in the CHP (CHP, 1969, p. 127). With the emergence of the left-of-centre movement in the CHP, these segments that were alienated from the people lost their effect, and a new way was opened for “the real” mission of the CHP –i.e. a complete revolution. In this sense, Ecevit’s discourse was revolutionary in economic and social policy while the former CHP had been conservative in these fields, as Sunar argued.

Also, Ecevit (1975b, p. 16) declared his discontent with revolutionism by using the power of the state in spite of the people and names his attitude as the people’s democratic revolutionism, i.e. accomplishing all social and economic revolutions with the power of the people, by the people and for the people. The main conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that Ecevit transformed Kemalist reformism into a continuous revolutionism in a populist manner.

### **Secularism: respect for religious beliefs or degeneration of the origin?**

Secularism acquired a new phase in Ecevit discourse. “Bureaucratic enforcement of secularism as a form of oppression” in the one-party rule and militant interpretation of secularism by the CHP needed to be relinquished by time. In this sense, Ecevit represented a more moderate position concerning secularism in a respectful stance towards religious beliefs. For him, it was a historical mistake to see religion as an impediment to progressiveness and reformism, and he argued that his coalition with religious MSP (National Salvation Party) dealt a blow to this historical mistake. Moreover, Ecevit said that “Islam and religious emotions of our people are not obstacles, but facilitative factors towards social justice” (CHP, 1974, p. 95). In the Nineteenth Congress of CHP in 1968, he warned the party members not to come at people’s religious sentiments (Koloğlu, 2001, p. 314).

### **MARXISM OR MARX’S METHODOLOGY?**

After elaborating on Mithat Paşa and Kemalism, we can deal with the problem between Marxism and Ecevit’s Democratic Left. As Erdoğan (1998, p. 27) puts it, Ecevit’s discourse uses Marxist terminology, despite its anti-Marxist attitude. Treating Karl Marx as the theoretician of Marxism in the first place may lead some scholars to see a monopoly of Marxism over some concepts. However, in the first place, Marx was a social scientist who studied social phenomena comprehensively and critically and reached a conclusion. In his inquiry, Marx systematised and benefited from the leftist outlooks that emerged before him. Like other social scientists, he developed his way of social inquiry or methodology in his analysis. For Bülent

Ecevit (1975a, p. 28), proposing Marxist solutions and using Marx's methodology is different. He exemplifies it with American Marxologists using Marx's methods of analysis while not adhering to Marxism. In this sense, he seems to treat Marx as a social scientist in the first place. A clarifying example of how Marx's way of analysis affected Ecevit's (1972, p. 53) thinking is the identification of his movement with the process of becoming conscious in the social-economic sense and as a historical trend that could not be stopped. This argument is similar to historical materialism.

Here, we identify the relationship between Marxism and Ecevit (1974, p. 4) as "problematic" since while not concealing that he made use of Marx's methodology, he at the same time, criticised scientific socialism –to which Marx reached by using his methodology- on the ground that it is in a contradiction with being scientific. He sees a connection between scepticism and science, especially in social and political sciences; there is no one truth or reality (Ecevit, 1975a, p. 4). For this reason, he criticised Marxist orthodoxy and scientific socialism. According to Alev Coşkun (1978, p. 15), all leftist movements -such as utopians, Owenists, Marxists, Leninists, revisionists, Fabians, democratic socialists, etc.- inspired by socialist sources of thinking, but while realising the goals, there are two ways which separate leftist movements: first, the way for coming to power; second, extent and scope of ownership of means of production. Following this line of argument, he justifies the similarities between Democratic Left CHP and other leftist movements.

It could also be argued that defining his movement out of Marxist tradition provided Ecevit with an area of manoeuvre. There was an attempt to justify it by calling for different origins from western social democratic movements with Marxist backgrounds. For example, while western socialists or democratic socialists emerged as workers' movements, in Turkey, although he said that the Democratic Left movement started with his struggle for workers' rights, more than half of the population was peasants, and the peasants were under exploitation (Ecevit, 1992, pp. 14-25). Hence, conditions and origins were different. It could be raised against this argument that there are similar social formations in other parts of the world, and the left movements did not necessarily dismiss Marxism. However, in this context, he talked about Marxist-oriented social democratic movements, and it was evident that democratic socialism is usually associated with the industrialised West.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the relationship between Ecevit's movement in the 1970s and Mithat Paşa, Kemalism and Marxism. It may seem like a "discourse analysis" that became very popular among scholars in recent decades. However, we attempted to locate Ecevit's Democratic Left movement historically by referring mainly to his discourse. The main conclusions that could be reached are:

Ecevit tries to link his movement to Ottoman-Turkish modernisation via Mithat Paşa and the Republican era via Kemalism. Nevertheless, differences in historical, political, economic and social backgrounds preclude them from being linked. Moreover, even Mithat Paşa and the Republican era could not be linked. It is also an interesting point that while Kemalist modernisation attempts to burn its bridges with Ottoman heritage, Ecevit, a figure associated with Kemalist tradition, attaches importance to Ottoman modernisation.

Despite all close ties with Kemalist tradition, the re-articulation of Kemalist principles to the Democratic Left was a suspenseful one. Moreover, ideological inclinations of Ecevit's new

movement resulted in a paradigmatic shift within Kemalism. In this sense, Ecevit seems to be a figure as a critique from within Kemalism.

It is also arguable that Ecevit's differentiation between Marxism and Marx's methodology in social science is valid. Ecevit seems to escape from ties with Marxism by referring to this differentiation. However, this does not eradicate the problem between Ecevit and Marxism.

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