

## BOOK REVIEW

Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (2016).

Cihan Tuğal's *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (2016) seeks to explain the limits of market-friendly conservative Islam as a political template for the Middle East. It does so by highlighting the interplay of global economic forces with the structure of national "political society,"<sup>1</sup> i.e. with the balance between continuously reshuffled power blocs<sup>2</sup>. Its main thesis is that this once-celebrated "Turkish model" is no longer viable, even for Turkey, as a result of i. subterranean structural forces and ii. the unpredictable revolts that unfolded from 2009 to 2013. It warns of the hazards the fall of the project may bring about in Turkey and elsewhere before attempting to outline what the left can do to turn such a dangerous moment into an opportunity.

As a book of political sociology, *The Fall of the Turkish Model* continues the venerable tradition of (neo-) Marxist structural analysis while supplementing that mode of analysis with insights from contemporary anthropology. As a book on current affairs, it re-mounts the by-now familiar critique of liberalism as a smokescreen for the projection of power, taking "liberal" commentators to task for disregarding AKP's authoritarian streak. In both capacities, it is a mixed success: While Tuğal's keen intellect shines through in many passages, *The Fall of the Turkish Model* has important conceptual and empirical shortcomings.

There are quite a few things the book does well. First, it shows the project of "Islamic liberalism" to have been contingent on a number of factors that are

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<sup>1</sup> In the work of Gramsci (1971), the superstructural – i.e. not directly economic – part of bourgeois society is divided into two interacting spheres: political society and civil society. Of the two tools of stabilizing society in line with capitalist interests, coercion belongs to political society while the production of consent takes place in civil society. As such, political society includes the state and actors, like political parties, that have proclaimed their interest in directing the state. Civil society, on the other hand, is conceptualized as a public sphere where institutions such as religion, the family, the press, schools, and trade unions operate, negotiating with the state on behalf of members of the ruled classes and producing authoritative definitions of the good life.

<sup>2</sup> For Gramsci, a power bloc is a combination of classes and class fractions in political society. Since the ruling class under capitalism is numerically a minority, it cannot rule alone; it needs to form a power bloc that includes, for example, portions of the "middle class."

nonetheless intelligible. There is some attempt to systematically enumerate those factors. Second, it shows quantitatively and qualitatively that AKP's economic miracle never existed. Third, its comparative setup makes good sense. The cases – Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran in addition to Turkey – are chosen wisely and their analyses are conducted with considerable flair. Tuğal's method integrates the eventful critique of the comparative method (Sewell, 1996), but sensibly restrains the Foucaultesque excesses of that critique. Fourth, the concept of intermittent/recursive revolution advanced in the conclusion is a very promising idea. Born of a thoughtful critique of the notion of permanent revolution, the idea of intermittent revolution – relatively calm times of reflection and forward-looking organization alternating with and feeding into heady days of open resistance and revolt – will be useful to scholars and activists alike.

When it comes to Tuğal's main theoretical intervention, however, *The Fall of the Turkish Model* is less successful. In a belated replay of the Marx-Weber debate, Tuğal takes issue with scholars who, like Şerif Mardin, identify civil society as the source of a liberal, inclusive Islam (Mardin, 1973, 1989), a notion that was frequently vulgarized during the first years of AKP rule (Yavuz, 2009). Instead, he offers a view of social change as being determined in political society. While civil society for Tuğal houses issue-based initiatives, political society consists of actors with comprehensive, thoroughgoing blueprints of the good life. The extent to which any construction of "Islam" can be democratic, Tuğal asserts, is a matter for actors who concern themselves not with this or that corner of the social fabric but with its totality.

Leaving aside the question of whether political and civil society can, in Tuğal's Gramscian perspective, operate independently of one another, Tuğal's claim is not tested in the trademark rigor of his earlier work. Consider the following quote from chapter four: "Lacking political organizations that tied them together, the Egyptian working and middle classes went their own ways once their fleeting coalition fulfilled its immediate goal (toppling the dictator) and thereby avoided the arduous task of cross-cultural communication, which becomes even more burdensome in the absence of multiclass political organizations. Both classes would pay a dear price for their lack of interest in each other's concerns in the coming years." How do we know that the problem is the absence of *political* organizations rather than *social* or *cultural* ones? Tuğal's specific argument here is based on a comparison with Tunisia, but even supposing that a single comparison can establish anything, what is established is the *possibility*, not the *necessity*, of overcoming divisions via work in political society. There just might be other ways. And even if political society turns out to be the absolutely necessary proximate cause, such an effective political society can itself ultimately be the product of a dense and lively civil society, a possibility Tuğal never considers even though the quote above begs for it.

There are also conceptual issues. First, contrary to Tuğal's claim, the civil society perspective is not simply a subspecies of liberalism. It belongs more fully to republicanism, which is an alternative to liberalism (Skinner, 1978; Sandel, 1984). Stretching back to Aristotle, republican thought takes human beings as political animals and is thus free of the "suspicion of the political" that, for Tuğal, is the main reason why his opponents fail. Second, Tuğal uses the faults of the least capable specimens of the civil society perspective to reject that perspective wholesale: second- and third-class ideologues, and not giants like Mardin and Tocqueville, are his real adversaries. Related to this, while a case can be made that the (bastardized form of the) civil society argument reigns supreme in middle-brow venues like *The Economist*, cutting edge social scientific work presents, contrary to Tuğal's claim, a very different picture: "the primacy of the political" has long been a powerful position in sociology and anthropology.

Some of the book's shortcomings are simultaneously empirical and conceptual. Referring to the Gezi events, for instance, Tuğal writes that the passive revolution<sup>3</sup> of the AKP ended because it could not make the lives of the new petty bourgeoisie – office workers with significant amounts of cultural capital – less "boring." The existential dread that takes center stage here, however, belongs with civil rather than political society. Also, Tuğal arrives at this conclusion with very little empirical backing: In the absence of thorough ethnographic or survey research on young professionals, his claim is too speculative.

All in all, *The Fall of the Turkish Model* could have been a better book. The research and the thinking that went into it are no doubt considerable; its prose is inviting; and the concept of intermittent revolution will expand the horizons of many. These accomplishments are compromised, however, by Tuğal's determination to use any and all findings as opportunities to attack an ill-defined enemy – "liberalism" – when it is not at all clear either that the antagonist of his narrative is indeed (a form of) liberalism or that the findings in question lend themselves to such a critique.

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<sup>3</sup> Passive revolution refers to the absorption of an erstwhile threat to the ruling order into that order. Passive revolutions transform political structures while restoring the power of the ruling class. They are "revolution-restorations" that potentially involve significant upheaval whose energies are channeled into the reproduction and expansion of existing relations of production. The concept underlies Tuğal's (2009) magisterial account of the rise of the AKP after the disintegration of Kemalist hegemony.

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