7532 words

Ceyda Çekmeci

Dissertation Prospectus, Fall 2024

**Music, Hegemony, and the Aesthetics of Authoritarian Neoliberalism**

**in Contemporary Turkey**

**Introduction**

What is the place of music-making in an increasingly antidemocratic political world order? What political work did arts and culture do as authoritarian regimes took shape in many countries in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Does music provide resistance to hard-right populist rule? Is it also complicit in perpetuating state power? Even as artists make radical anti-authoritarian claims for their own work, is counter-hegemonic musical action effective under futile conditions? My dissertation broaches these questions by focusing on music’s political function under the most paradigmatic of these contemporary authoritarian regimes, namely the Erdoğan/AKP government, in power in Turkey since 2002. [[1]](#footnote-2)

The rise of antidemocratic politics has been a critical area of investigation in fields such as political science, sociology, and cultural studies. Wendy Brown’s 2019 book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* describes these emerging global formations in view of populist assaults on elite liberal democratic norms. Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), explores whether art provides authentic resistance to these assaults, given that progressive political art more usually amounts to an aesthetic and affective, but not *effective*, challenge to systems of power. Meanwhile, music scholars continue to be occupied with the topical obsession “music and resistance” (Drott, 2011; Currie, 2012; Abe, 2016; Tausig, 2019; Sonevytsky, 2019; Luger, 2019) while engaging sporadically with issues of music and violence (Cusick, 2006; 2008; Taruskin, 2010; Potter, 2016). As a result, our field is dominated by a static view of music’s political affordances. That view holds that music automatically supplies a way out of the oppressive conditions, its autonomy ensuring the art’s insulation from both sociopolitical theory, and the more disturbing realities of our current political era.

My project will agitate against presuppositions of music’s politics by engaging with sophisticated methods and approaches deployed by recent contemporary social and political theorists wrestling with updated Gramscian theories of hegemonic control. In the context of contemporary Turkey, sociologist Cihan Tuğal (2009; 2016) identifies the AKP regime — which used to be referred to as the “Turkish Model” in the early 2000s — as a previously radical and anti-system Islamist movement’s constitution of hegemony within liberal capitalism. In hegemonic systems, power is not imposed through force and top-down practices; instead, it operates at the most *molecular* levels (in the Gramscian sense of the word), intertwined with everyday practices. It is at the level of norms and routines, Tuğal shows, that power blocs work to generate consent of the governed by engaging in strategies of co-optation and “articulation.” That word “articulation” is a key concept for him, referring to the process by which different social elements get connected in sociology.[[2]](#footnote-3) This dissertation adapts contemporary sociological approaches in order to situate music, culture, arts, and aesthetics in view of a hegemonic understanding of the current political regime.

The first half of my dissertation presents musical phenomena that address questions to do with articulation, consent and complicity. The noisiest musical form under examination is the “arabesk,” a lyric genre that was articulated to the hegemonic ideology during the AKP regime through specific populist and affective strategies. Another is an informal network of musicians, colloquially dubbed “sycophant artists” (*yalaka sanatçılar*) in Turkey, who consistently align themselves with the power bloc by working to generate consent for the prevailing regime. The second half of the dissertation switches 180 degrees, to investigate the role of music-making, not so much in shoring up power, as stirring up counter-hegemonic or popular sentiment, exploring a new kind of aesthetics emerging under the so-called Arab Spring. Here, the question is whether a new aesthetics of opposition (defined by humor and creativity) has ever effectively undermined the hegemony. The dissertation will conclude with a chapter offering suggestions for the future of the counter-hegemonic project in the sphere of arts and culture.

My research question is this: *what does music do politically* in societies defined by right-wing hegemonic systems? The case of contemporary Turkey presents a striking example, shedding light on how music and politics align or misalign according to emerging illiberal democracies.

**Rationale and Literature Review**

There is a political premise underlying my persuasion of the need to build a strong sociology of music. That premise holds that understanding how power operates and situating musical phenomena in existing power structures is a precondition for writing a responsible history of music. In thinking about any artistic or cultural category, I take the most important questions to be ones that deal with their social significance, relationship to power, and whether they help perpetuate the status quo or work against it. It is in that sense that research that does not engage with pressing socio-political issues fails: either by asking the wrong questions, or addressing issues that have no material effects on people’s lives. In the literature focusing on music in Turkey since the early Republican period (1920s to 1950s) extending to the present day, there is a sporadic concern to theorize a relation between the musical and the social, but no thorough engagement with sociological theories and approaches. Several Turkish sociologists have examined musical phenomena from a sociological lens, including Meral Özbek (1991) on arabesk, modernity, and hegemony, as well as Meltem Ahıska (2005; 2010) on Turkish radio broadcasting.[[3]](#footnote-4) On the musicological side, questions of social structure have barely featured, or been engaged with in off-hand ways.

Musicological works focusing on the early Republican period (Markoff, 1990; Feldman, 1990; O’Connell, 2000; 2005; 2013; Değirmenci, 2006; Erol, 2012) loosely echoed the “center-periphery” framework of the 1970s, famously theorized by sociologist Şerif Mardin (1973). Mardin’s work allowed scholars to examine the relations between a strong “center,” which he identified as the republican bureaucratic elite, and an Islamic, rural “periphery,” separated from the official elite. This framework was useful for music scholars to document top-down cultural policies and regulations imposed in the first few decades of the republic. Martin Stokes’s well-known book *The Arabesk Debate* (1992) also overlapped with this framework, as he presented the genre “arabesk” as the culture of a marginalized periphery. In the 1990s and early 2000s, an “alternative modernities” paradigm gained popularity, especially among such anthropologists as Nilüfer Göle (1996) and Esra Özyürek (2006). This paradigm proved useful in deconstructing the binary between modern secular republicanism and Islamic traditionalism. Stokes’s work on arabesk also paralleled this paradigm, as he treated the genre as distinctively urban and modern. More recently, as noted above, Gramscian theories of hegemony have gained sociological traction. Most representative of this orientation is the aforementioned sociologist Cihan Tuğal (2009; 2016), who shows how Turkish Islamism developed a hegemonic strategy under Erdoğan and the AKP, eventually being absorbed into the overall consumerist, secular and capitalist system: a process which he calls “passive revolution.” While sociologists have adapted their theories to fit changing social and political circumstances, musicologists have not stayed up to date with respect to current social theories. Most recent published studies of music in Turkey have instead turned towards affect theory, as well as anthropologies of feeling, emotion, and senses (Stokes, 2010; Gill, 2017;2021).

The disciplinary trajectory of Turkish sociology, from the “center-periphery” framework to the “alternative modernities” paradigm and finally to Neo-Gramscian approaches, demonstrates that new directions have been more effective in analyzing current socio-political trends. While examining top-down state policies emanating from the center and imposed upon the periphery was maybe the best way to understand the early Republican era, sociologists have shown Gramscian analyses to work much better for the AKP period. The reason for that is the current political regime differs from that of the early decades of the republic in its strategies of establishment of authority. While top-down reforms and regulations heavily defined the early Republican era, the source of AKP’s authority has been the *consent* of the subordinate classes and drawing the political alternatives into its own thought scheme, which are key elements in hegemonic theory. In today’s Turkey, the political work of music-making remarkably correlates with the characteristics of a hegemonic system: musicians wishfully aligning themselves with the power bloc, the government fostering relations with these musicians to generate wider public consent, and embracing a diverse set of genres and musicians. It is for this reason that the study of music and power in contemporary Turkey can greatly benefit from being in dialogue with the new sociological approaches. Earlier social paradigms like “center-periphery” and “alternative modernities” once had explanatory power but now fall short in accounting for the contemporary regime. The brief history of the progress of Turkish musicology that follows seeks to explain this in further detail. It outlines the disciplinary dialogue between music studies and sociology throughout the history of the republic, their benefits and shortfalls, and the recent turn away from socio-political theories and approaches.

✼

What is “Turkish musicology”?

The earliest archives casting light upon music in contemporary Turkey were the writings of social theorist Ziya Gökalp. In his book *The Principles of Turkism* (1923), Gökalp engineered a particular Turkism as the ideology of the newly-built nation, and outlined a nationalist approach in areas ranging from literature, music and arts to ethics, law, economics, politics, philosophy and religion. In a section on “national music” (*millî musiki*), he diagnosed Turkish art music as “morbid” (*hasta*) and non-national (*gayr-ı millî*) and advocated for the hybridization of Turkish folk music and Western music.[[4]](#footnote-5) He argued in these terms:

As Folk music is the music of our culture, and Western music is the music of our new civilization, neither is foreign to us. In that case, our national music will arise from the mixture of folk music in our land and Western music. Our folk music gave us many melodies. If we collect these and harmonize them in the style of Western music, we will have a music that is both national and European. Music committees of the Turkish Hearths are among those who will fulfill this duty. The program of Turkism in the field of music consists essentially of this, and the rest belongs to our national musicians. (143)

The cultural policies developed in the first decades of the republic were heavily indebted to Gökalp’s distinctions. The republican elite embarked upon a series of projects to dismiss *alaturka* music and replace it with *alafranga*, two terms used to refer to Turkish art music and Western classical music at the time. In 1926, Turkish art music was officially expunged from the curriculum. Meanwhile, the *alaturka* section of the first official music school of the Ottoman Empire, *Dârülelhan*, was restructured to become the “Society for the Fixing and Classification of Turkish Music” (*Alaturka Mûsikî Tasnif ve Tespit Heyeti*) with limited funds and a decreased number of positions.[[5]](#footnote-6) The conservatories of the new republic trained students in Western classical music instead, until the first Turkish Music Conservatory was founded in as late as 1976 within Istanbul Technical University. The broadcasting of Western classical music was prioritized in the early Republican period and Turkish art music was banned from the radios for eight months in 1934. In the years following the foundation of the Republic in 1923, five composers were sent abroad by the state to be trained in Western classical music and work towards the ideal of building a “national music” upon their return. They were called “the Turkish Five” (Ahmet Adnan Saygun, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Cemal Reşit Rey, Hasan Ferit Alnar, Necil Kazım Akses).

In the second half of the 1930s, such European musicians as Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith were invited in Turkey to assist in the collection of folk music and structuring of music institutions. Bartók documented his work in *Turkish Folk Music from Asia Minor*, which was published posthumously in 1976. Music scholar Ahmed Adnan Saygun (one of the Five) published an article in 1951 to illuminate aspects of Bartók’s work in Turkey. In an edition of *Turkish Folk Music from Asia Minor* (1976), Saygun included a letter he exchanged with Bartók in 1939 in an attempt to uncover the Hungarian composer’s relations with the Turkish government. Hindemith’s reports are preserved in the digital archives of Cevad Memduh Altar and can also be found in the book, *Hindemith Raporları 1935 / 1936 /1937* (2013), edited by Şefik Kahramankaptan and translated by Elif Damla Yavuz.

All these top-down cultural policies had to be documented and reflected upon – scholars eventually did so after several decades – in order that a school of music scholarship could emerge. The first reflective writings on the republican discourse and policies on music arrived as late as the year 1990. Scholars such as Irene Markoff (1990), Walter Feldman (1990), John Morgan O’Connell (2000, 2005, 2013), Koray Değirmenci (2006), and Ayhan Erol (2012) elaborated on such topics as top-down state policies on music, debates about the alaturka/alafranga distinctions, and ideology and discourse around musical practice and taste in the first few decades of the republic. With varying degrees of focus, these studies shared an emphasis on a strong secular state controlling aesthetics and shaping the musical sphere. Their work was significant at the time, as the scholarly field of music was still dominated by a line of academics and intellectuals who adhered to the strict republican ideal of appropriating Western classical musical techniques and approaches. The proceedings of the Music Congress organized by The Ministry of Culture and Tourism in June 1988 were a case in point. Invited speakers presented views on the necessity of Western-style harmonization in “modernizing” and “universalizing” the Turkish national music, the role of TRT (Turkish Radio Television) broadcasting and music education in that effort, music’s place in promotion and publicity of Turkey (Filiz Ali; Cem Mansur), as well as papers bemoaning the dissolution of the national music endeavor after the death of Atatürk (Nevit Kodallı) and critiquing the genre “arabesk” as fatalistic, submissive, and deprived of moral responsibility (Ihsan Turgut).

Since the early 1990s, arabesk has indeed been a major organizing topic for music studies on Turkey, attracting the attention of scholars from Turkey and abroad. The genre was introduced to Euro-American music studies by the foundational work of ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes. His book, *The Arabesk Debate* (1992) is evocative, not only of the musical characteristics of the genre (such as the themes, texts, and musical organization), but also of the culture of it. Stokes describes the audience of arabesk in ethnographic detail: the urban migrants living on the outskirts of Istanbul, their ways of life, concerns and preoccupations as well as how this culture was looked upon by the secularists as degenerate, passive, and pessimistic. To provide a background, he contrasts the central reformist tradition in government with an Islamist rural reactionary periphery; he documents the tensions between and respective ideologies associated with the two. With respect to framing, Stokes’s work shares the same critical stance as O’Connell et. al., especially for the ways it assesses the effects of the top-down cultural policies of the republican elite on marginalized Islamist subgroups. In that sense, all these works assume the early “center-periphery” paradigm, although they do not engage with it directly. Stokes’s book in particular is more multifaceted than so far suggested, indirectly paralleling the “alternative modernities” paradigm as well, in that modernity, far from being the monopoly of the secular center, is assigned to Islamist outsiders too.

In the meantime — in fact a year before *The Arabesk Debate* came out — Turkish sociologist Meral Özbek published a remarkable book on arabesk entitled *Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski* (1991).[[6]](#footnote-7) In her book, Özbek sought to explain how the genre was “articulated” (Stuart Hall, 1986) to new conservative ideologies by the center-right ANAP government in the 1980s, although it had carried subversive associations between late 60s and late 70s. Her analysis directly engages with a number of sociological theories and approaches to modernity, popular culture, and hegemony. While accounting for arabesk music, she theorizes about the political potential of popular culture and the possibilities of its articulation. Özbek’s examination of the subject through a determinate sociological perspective and her prescient Gramscian approach are not the only merits of her research. By focusing on the new conservatism within the power bloc, Özbek perfectly grasped the changing political scene in Turkey in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup. Indeed, the suppression of the left and the general atmosphere of 1980s political oppression paved the way for new right-wing administrations in ways she anticipated, and in ways that made it necessary to go beyond the “secular center” versus “Islamist periphery” dichotomy. The center-periphery paradigm, so useful to early republican scholars, had to be replaced with new approaches. As such, I take Özbek as the pioneer of the kind of sociology of music I am looking for, although the insights of her book never made their way into Euro-American musicology, likely because it was never translated into English.

By the 2010s, ethnographic interest in Turkish music had shifted decisively towards affective categories such as intimacy, love, affection, melancholy and nostalgia. Stokes’s more recent book, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (2010), tells a cultural and political history of Turkey since the 1950s by focusing on three specific musicians —Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay, and Sezen Aksu— whom Stokes describes as “voices of cultural intimacy.” In a 2017 book, *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam, and Turkish Classical Musicians*, Denise Gill focuses on the notion of melancholy as the “primary binding agent” (5) of the community of Turkish Classical Musicians. Her fascination with categories of feeling and emotion are redolent of an “affect turn” in twenty-first-century North American humanities departments. More recently, especially after the failed coup of 2016, there has been a growing interest in “soundscape studies,” after the model of R. Murray Schafer. Articles by such ethnomusicologists as Evrim Hikmet Öğüt (2016), Erol Köymen (2017), Nil Başdurak (2020) and Denise Gill (2016, 2021), fascinated by the relation between sound and space, describe the soundscapes of contemporary Turkey under the AKP regime. These works tend to focus on the countrywide recitation of *sela* (a type of Islamic call to prayer) in the aftermath of the coup attempt in order to demonstrate how power operates through sound (and at times through other senses). The influence of the affective turn is present here, as the emphasis is on how we hear, feel, and indeed *experience* power with our senses. As fascinating as this work is, centering affect in scholarly analyses and treating it as an end-game overlooks the historicity of political regimes and discourages scholars from making strong theoretical connections between music and power. What, in the first place, *is* this regime in which power operates so affectively? How are we to understand affect theoretically and historically to make better sense of why it works in the way it works? In other words, why affect, and why now?

✼

In my dissertation, I situate music, culture, arts, and aesthetics within a sociological understanding of the current political regime. The aim of this project is to bring the concept of hegemony to music studies, not as an absolute social framework, but as a framework that works well within the context of the contemporary political formation that is Turkey. Such an analysis intervenes in music studies on two different levels. First, a hegemonically-informed approach challenges the static disciplinary view that music promises a way out of oppressive conditions by studying situations where music-making acts to strengthen the authoritarian regime. Second, it updates Turkish music studies by moving away from the outdated assumption that the cultural sphere remains in the hands of a center-left republican and secularist elite. The story of a republican elite promoting Western art music via top-down cultural policies is a story of the 1920s and 1930s; the story of arabesk music as a bottom-up Islamist reaction to republican cultural policies is a story of the 1960s. Writing a history of the present requires an acknowledgement of the shift from a secular to Islamist hegemony and an updated social and political theoretical approach.

**Chapter 1**

**The Dictator is Singing: “New Turkey”, New Musicology, and A New History of Arabesk**

In this chapter, I embrace Tuğal’s hegemonic analysis of contemporary Turkey and rewrite the history of arabesk as a history of articulation. Highlighting Özbek’s initial observations on the ANAP government’s strategies of articulating arabesk, I argue that a more comprehensive integration with the new conservatism happened under the AKP regime. The chapter will begin and end with Erdoğan, who has been a “singing leader” during his twenty-two years in power. His performances in election rallies often feature arabesk songs. Often, they center intense expressions of love for followers, and references to Erdoğan himself either with his full name or the third person pronoun “o” in Turkish. The lyrics Erdoğan uses are laden with a love language typical of arabesk, which, conveyed through his affective performativity, imply an at once intimate and transcendent bond between the leader and his supporters. Besides this deliberate integration of the love language of arabesk into political speeches, the regime now collaborates with arabesk musicians enthusiastically. These strategies generate an affective attachment to the ruling party, ultimately functioning to manufacture consent for antidemocratic policies. While the condescending stance of the republican ideology towards the genre has not disappeared, arabesk has long ceased to be a subaltern genre.

As described above, therefore, my task is to rewrite the history of arabesk from a sociological perspective, placing the concept of “articulation” in dialogue with Gramscian theory. Since its emergence in the 1960s as a subculture and its rapid popularization in the following two decades, arabesk has fostered a close relationship with ruling elites. Euro-American ethno/musicological circles are familiar with arabesk and the political tensions surrounding it by virtue of the work of Stokes (1992), who presented the condescending stance of Turkey’s bureaucratic elite and center-left secularists towards the genre, as previously mentioned. Arabesk, Stokes writes, was looked down upon as degenerate (*yoz*) by representatives of the secularist republican elite — be they politicians, intellectuals, or artists— and this was why the genre has dominated public discussion in Turkey. That, however, is only the first part of the story.

Turkey’s secularist-republican ruling class experienced a crisis in the late twentieth century after the military coup of September 12, 1980. This coup swept up several socialist revolutionary movements, the scale of imprisonment, torture, and execution being comparable to the Chilean coup of September 11, 1973 (Parla, 2007, 90-94). The aftermath of the 1980 coup prepared the ground for right-wing politics to gain momentum, as Islamist movements and conservative politicians gained in popularity. As shown above, sociologist Özbek precisely grasped this political shift. *Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski* (1992) suggests that arabesk first emerged as a subculture with strong subversive potential in the late 1960s; by the 1970s, it was seen as “the revolt of the proletariat.” After 1983, she argued, the genre became increasingly associated with the conservative ANAP government. Özbek theorized this as an event of “articulation” and pointed to factors such as the genre’s popularization and the populist ANAP government’s strategic embrace and utilization of a new popular culture.

One more seismic political shift in Turkish history occurred when the political Islamist AKP’s (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, translation: Justice and Development Party) triumphed in the elections of 2002. Then Prime Minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his vision of the new path ahead with the phrase “New Turkey.” Meanwhile, European countries joined the U.S. and the Arab world by lauding the at once “Islamic” and “democratic” assent to free-market principles as the “Turkish Model.” During the twenty-two-year-long reign of the AKP, arabesk remained relevant to Turkish politics, yet there has been no reassessment in relation to Erdoğan’s embrace of it. While Özbek’s analysis of the initial moments of identification of arabesk with conservative politics in the 1980s remained invisible in the Euro-American scholarly fields of music, no further theorizations account for the genre’s articulation to the new hegemony. Stokes’s analysis of arabesk — foundational and yet blind to the genre’s shifting politics — remains the only framework available to music scholarship, which is why a new history of arabesk is required, one that accounts for its association with hard-right populism today.

**Chapter 2**

**The Art of Sycophancy: Music, Consent, and Complicity in Erdogan’s Turkey**

Under hegemonic conditions, it is not the case that all artistic activity is controlled, all facets of culture regulated, and all creativity suppressed. Instead, hegemony is constructed via consent and artists often appear as willful actors, participating freely in state politics and producing art in support of populism. This chapter focuses on the sycophant (*yalaka*) artists, mostly musicians, who align with the AKP and influence public opinion in favor of government policies. This is a network of musicians without an official name or institution: it is rather a group of celebrities attending Erdoğan’s invitations to receptions, roundtable meetings, *iftar* (fast-breaking) meals, or political stunts such as presidential visits to the border. Erdoğan has been organizing these events since his early years in power. They are generally staged for propagandistic reasons: to inform civic society about new policies, or perform consensus during moments of crisis.

The chapter will trace Turkey’s official policies over the past twenty-two years and show how such “sycophant artists” have been integral to manufacturing consent at turning points in recent history. The main thread will follow the “Democratic Initiative Process” (*Demokratik Açılım Süreci*), also known as the “Solution Process” (*Çözüm Süreci*), initiated by the AKP government with the aim of improving the democratic rights of Kurdish citizens, who have been systematically deprived of basic legal rights, ethnic recognition, and mother-tongue education despite forming a large minority in the Republic of Turkey. The Democratic Initiative Process was initiated with three roundtable meetings in 2010. Remarkably, in February of that year, the first of these meetings featured no less than sixty-two musicians; in March, a second meeting was organized with prominent figures from Turkish cinema; in April, a third event welcomed authors and thinkers. Musicians like those who attended the first meeting, who lent their full support to the Democratic Initiative Process when it began, were also there to support Erdoğan at the Oğulpınar border post in 2018 when the Democratic Initiative Process had long been abandoned and the Turkish military was conducting operations to Kurdish districts in northern Syria.

The aim of tracing the changing policies through the voluntary support and participation of musicians is threefold. First, it provides an answer to the overarching research question of this dissertation: what does music do politically in contemporary hegemonic systems? The chapter shows how hegemony is constructed and how music and musicians work to legitimize the state. Second, it challenges the widespread tendency in academia and elsewhere to place music on the side of resistance by providing an example where music works for “evil” rather than “good”. Last but not least, there is an underlying trust in the politics of exposure: authoritarian regimes are perpetuated on a daily basis by countless actors and they should be identified and held responsible for their actions in every facet. Here, musician-agents are identified as complicit in perpetuating the authoritarian AKP regime. The destructive consequences of their actions are documented.

The use of the phrase “the *art* of sycophancy” in my title is intentional. This points to the widespread assumption in the oppositional camp that art and artists are inherently progressive and therefore always potentially dissident. Progressive politicians, artists, and intellectuals as well as alternative media outlets frequently deride sycophants as inauthentic or fake artists, dismissing them altogether. The Turkish left, in other words, harshly criticizes sycophant culture, but in doing so usually endorse a romanticized view of art and artists. I acknowledge the complication here: when political conditions are so unstable and oppressive – when the stakes are so high – opposition activists and thinkers are compelled, even if for strategic reasons, to condemnsycophants and lay claim to artists as natural dissidents and the arts as inherently resistant. I assert, however, that the failure of the sycophants is not artistic but ethical. In this chapter, I insist on the sycophants’ ontological status as artists and their works as art, despite being politically accountable and complicit in the oppressive regime. By exploring the phenomenon of musical sycophancy in contemporary Turkey and registering its political impact, I show that conservative and illiberal artistic practices are crucial to our understanding of the continued strength of authoritarian regimes.

**Chapter 3**

**Creative or Futile? Aesthetics of Opposition Under Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Gezi Protests and Beyond**

Chapter 3 will turn to the counter-hegemonic side and explore the aesthetics of opposition, riffing on the possibility of art providing resistance to authoritarian control. The chapter will focus on a new kind of aesthetics that emerged in 2013 during the Gezi protests, widely considered the most significant wave of demonstrations in Turkey’s recent history, echoing the themes of the broader Arab Spring movements. Gezi protests, which spread quickly across the country, were colorful and festive, marked by the strong presence of music and dance. The aesthetics of the revolt, which Tuğal refers to as a “carnivalesque aesthetics” in *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought down Islamic Liberalism* (2016), was characterized by creativity, innovation, entertainment, dynamism and humor. Although the Gezi protests eventually subsided after a few months, some aspects of its carnivalesque aesthetics continued to be adopted by Turkey’s opposition: especially its silly humor, increasingly with a touch of cynicism, nihilism, and a “knowing grimace” to borrow Wendy Brown’s words (2019).

The knowing grimace does not come out of nowhere: it points to an impasse, where anti-democratic regimes continue to gain in strength, while efforts to undermine them become futile. What is interesting is that despite the sense of futility, people still hold to the aesthetic that once seemed to fulfill a resistant function. The kind of sarcastic humor circulating during the Gezi protests subsists overwhelmingly on social media platforms, whether in the form of political commentary or creative projects such as making remixes of a politician’s hate speech or the constituencies’ expressions of love and loyalty towards the leader and the regime. Lauren Berlant, in the last chapter of *Cruel Optimism* (2011), analyzes several contemporary art works motivated by similar political intentions. Commenting on one of the art projects aimed at “diminishing the state,” she writes: “This is an old tactic for diminishing *affectively* what is much harder to diminish *effectively*” (244, emphasis mine). Taking on a similar stance, I argue that such current forms of "political art” provide what I call *an affective substitute for politics* under hegemonic conditions.

This is not to blame those who believe in the faux-revolutionary aesthetics of contemporary oppositional art. My aim is to closely examine this desperate need, this strange desire, this persisting belief that art provides resistance to authoritarian control, despite the futility of a positive attitude. Berlant calls this “the desire for the political,” one in which aspirant artists seek routes out of the impasse by merely “feeling political together.” But the desire for the political, she implies, can also amount to form of cruel optimism in the sense that it is a fantasy that keeps failing. This brings up a disturbing question of what arts and culture do politically under hegemonic conditions. The evidence of the above might suggest that, when successfully articulated to the regime, the freedoms of art only work to generate consent for hegemonic reason; whereas, on the counter-hegemonic side, art inspires futility to the point of cruelty? The chapter will close with an invitation to think about what can be done to rescue political art from cruel optimism, which will be explored further in the last chapter.

**Chapter 4**

**Searching for the Inarticulable: The Example of Ahmet Kaya and the Future of the Counter-Hegemonic Project in the Sphere of Culture**

The final chapter will circle back to the concept of articulation explored in the first chapter in the context of arabesk music and start with the biography of the revolutionary Kurdish musician Ahmet Kaya, who, despite the repeated efforts of Erdoğan and his associates, could not be successfully articulated to the populist hegemony. Ahmet Kaya was a Kurdish musician and political activist, whose music is often categorized as “authentic music” (*özgün müzik*) or “revolutionary arabesk” (*devrimci arabesk*), with songs that reflect the Kurdish struggle and issues of social justice. The concepts explored throughout the dissertation will come together in a biographical account of Kaya’s life: his popularization as a revolutionary arabesk singer, the threats made against his life by a number of Turkish popular singers during an award ceremony, followed by his exile and death. Erdoğan himself made repeated attempts to articulate his music — other prominent figures of AKP like Abdullah Gül tried similarly — by having Kaya’s music played at political events and election rallies. He sang and cried along to it, embraced some aspects of his revolutionary politics, and made a case for the so-called alignment of himself and Kaya under the secular hegemony of the pre-AKP era.

The purpose of investigating Kaya’s biography is to ask after the conditions of an effective oppositional art and offer suggestions for the future of the counter-hegemonic project in the realm of arts and culture. To ask another way: why was Ahmet Kaya “inarticulable”? What made him so “immune to articulation,” and is it possible to create a more effective oppositional art by learning from his story? What does an “effective” oppositional art mean in the first place and where might we look for it? In answering these questions, I will pursue the analysis of the place of culture in hegemonic systems as explored throughout the dissertation. It will be established at this point that hegemony is constructed and maintained heavily in the cultural sphere, by which I mean at “molecular” social levels. This is why, argues Terry Eagleton in his book *Ideology* (1991):

In modern society, then, it is not enough to occupy factories or confront the state. What must be contested is the whole area of “culture,” defined in its broadest, most everyday sense. The power of the ruling class is spiritual as well as material; and any “counterhegemony” must carry its political campaign into this hitherto neglected realm of values and customs, speech habits and ritual practices (114)

Eagleton reminds us that direct confrontational action can only go so far in upending injustice, and insists on the importance of “culture” in organizing effective dissent. This is not to say that politics can simply be replaced by culture, meaning that politics will be effective *only* if exercised in the sphere of culture. In embracing Eagleton’s view, I propose that direct confrontational action (although it does not suffice by itself) can never be ignored. Ahmet Kaya was inarticulable for this very reason: his politics was never confined to his art. Throughout his career, he maintained a strong political stance and was publicly articulate about the social injustices faced by Kurdish minorities under AKP rule.

Having dealt with Kaya, I move on to examples of other figures of revolutionary music such as Edit Akbayram, Zülfü Livaneli, Selda Bağcan and bands such as Grup Yorum and Ezginin Günlüğü. These figures and groups, similarly “inarticulable,” prove the value of making strong political stands. Comparing these figures to Ahmet Kaya, I will argue that one other crucial aspect is the level of “cultural” generalization/popularization. Grup Yorum’s fan base, on one hand, completely inarticulable, is confined to socialist political activists; Ahmet Kaya, on the other hand, has long been embraced by all segments of society, transcending a narrowly leftist fan base. Herein lies the value of a truly popular music, one still indebted to the political reputation of the artist. Lastly, I will add more popular musicians to the picture, this time without explicit political agendas, and close the chapter with a discussion of intersectionality. In particular, I will address the feminisms of several popular musicians: not only the obvious ones like Sezen Aksu, but also traditional, conservative and highly complicated figures like Yıldız Tilbe that rarely get to be taken seriously. Arguing that to confront hegemony is to confront patriarchy and embracing complications, I will expand assumed understandings of the counter-hegemonic cultural sphere by looking beyond “revolutionary” musical figures. Music is open to articulation, not only to the hegemonic ideology but also to the counter-hegemonic projects. Just as there are cases of genres, like arabesk, that have been articulated to the AKP hegemony; there are cases where music by sycophant musicians, like Sibel Can, have been intensively (and confoundingly) appropriated by academic protestors, namely in the Boğaziçi Resistance of 2021. All of which is to say that music is an arena wherein hegemony might be constructed, maintained, reinforced, undermined, or even overthrown in multiple and complex ways. My idea is to make the case for “music in culture” as a possibility that must be kept open if hegemonic systems of the modern populist order are to be overthrown.

**Bibliography**

Abe, Marié. “Sounding Against Nuclear Power in Post-3.11 Japan: Resonances of Silence and Chindon-Ya.” *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 2 (2016): 233–62. <https://doi.org/10.5406/> ethnomusicology.60.2.0233.

Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. London: Verso, 2014.

Avcı, Mustafa. “Political Music in Turkey: The Birth and Diversification of Dissident and Conformist Music (1920–2000).” In *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics.* Oxford University Press, 2022.

Bartók, Béla, Ahmed Adnan Saygun, László Vikár, and Samira B Byron. “Béla Bartók’s Folk Music Research in Turkey  / by A. Adnan Saygun ; Edited by László Vikár ; [the Second Part Was Translated by Samira B. Byron].” Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976.

Bartók, Béla, and Peter Bartók. *Turkish Folk Music from Asia Minor  / Béla Bartók ; [Edited by Péter Bartók].* Rev. ed. Homosassa, Fla: Bartók Records, 2002.

Basdurak, Nil. “The Soundscape of Islamic Populism: Auditory Publics, Silences and the Myth of Democracy.” *SoundEffects (Aarhus, Denmark)* 9, no. 1 (2020): 132–148.

Benjamin, Walter, Hannah Arendt, and Harry. Zohn. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. In *Illuminations*. 1st Schocken paperback ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism : The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Buğra, Ayşe, and Osman Savaşkan. *New Capitalism in Turkey: The Relationship between Politics, Religion and Business*. Cheltenham, UK ; Edward Elgar, 2014.

Butler, Judith. “Merely Cultural.” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 265–77. <https://doi.org/> 10.2307/466744.

Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Second edition. London: Verso, 2014 [1985].

Cheng, William. *Loving Music till It Hurts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Cinar, Alev. *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Connell, John Morgan O’. “Fine Art, Fine Music: Controlling Turkish Taste at the Fine Arts Academy in 1926.” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000): 117–142.

Currie, James. *Music and the Politics of Negation*, 139–. Indiana University Press, 2012.

Cusick, Suzanne G. “Music as torture / Music as weapon.” Trans (Online), no. 10 (2006).

Cusick, Suzanne G. “‘You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World. . .’: Music in the Detention Camps of the ‘Global War on Terror.’” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–26.

Drott, Eric. *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968-1981*. 1st ed. Vol. 12. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology*. United Kingdom: Verso, 2020. [1991]

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic.* Oxford, UK ;: Blackwell, 1990.

Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago ;: The University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Edited by Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and François Ewald. Translated by David Macey. 1st edition. New York: Picador, 2003.

Frith, Simon. *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England ;: Ashgate, 2007.

Gill, Denise. *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam, and Turkish Classical Musicians.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Gill, Denise. “Sense Experiences.” *Public Culture* 33, no. 3 (2021): 393–415

Gökalp, Ziya. *Türkçülüğün Esasları*. Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2019 [1923].

Göle, Nilüfer. *The Forbidden Modern : Civilization and Veiling*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013 [reprint, 1996].

Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. [1929]

Grant, Roger Mathew. *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical.* New York, NY: Fordham University Press,, 2020.

Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies [1992].” In *Essential Essays, Volume 1*, 71–100. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020.

Hall, Stuart. “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Larry Grossberg and Others [1986].” In *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley, 222–46. Duke University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/> 10.2307/j.ctv11cw7c7.14.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford ;: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hecker, Pierre, Ivo Furman, and Kaya Akyıldız. *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Kahramankaptan, Şefik, ed. *Hindemith Raporları 1935 / 1936 / 1937*. Translated by Elif Damla Yavuz. Sevda Cenap And Müzik Vakfı, 2013.

Keyder, Caglar. *State and Class in Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development*. London [u.a.]: Verso, 1986.

Laclau, Ernesto. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory : Capitalism, Fascism, Populism  / Ernesto Laclau.* London: NLB, 1977.

Luger, Jason D. “When the Creative Class Strikes Back: State-Led Creativity and Its Discontents.” *Geoforum* 106 (2019): 330–339.

Mardin, Şerif. “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” *Daedalus* 102, no. 1 (1973): 169–90. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024114.

Markoff, Irene. “The Ideology of Musical Practice and the Professional Turkish Folk Musician: Tempering the Creative Impulse.” *Asian Music* 22, no. 1 (1990): 129–145.

Michaels, Walter Benn. “The Beauty of a Social Problem (e.g. Unemployment).” *Twentieth century literature* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 309–327.

Nelson, Maggie. *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2022.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass. ;: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Özbek, Meral., and Orhan. Gencebay. *Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski.* 1. baskı. Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991.

Özyürek, Esra. *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Parla, Taha. *Türk sorunu : siyasi yazılar 2, 1998-2007  / Taha Parla.* İlk basım. İstanbul: Metis, 2007.

Potter, Pamela M. *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts*. 1st ed. Vol. 50. University of California Press, 2016.

Saygun, A. Adnan. “Bartok in Turkey.” *The Musical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1951): 5–9. http:// www.jstor.org/stable/740104.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” In *Touching Feeling*, 123–152. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020.

Sonevytsky, Maria. “Listening for Dissensus.” *Music & Politics* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1–.

Stokes, Martin. *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Stokes, Martin. *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago ;: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Tansel, Cemal Burak. “Antinomies of Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Turkey: The Justice and Development Party Era.” In *States of Discipline*. United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2017.

Taruskin, Richard. *The Danger of Music And Other Anti-Utopian Essays*. University of California Press, 2010.

Tausig, Ben. *Bangkok Is Ringing: Sound, Protest, and Constraint*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Tuğal, Cihan. *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism.* Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Tuğal, Cihan. *The Fall of the Turkish Model : How the Arab Uprisings Brought down Islamic Liberalism.* London ;: Verso, 2016.

Way, Lyndon C. S. *Popular Music and Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies : Ideology, Control and Resistance in Turkey Since 2002*. London, UK ;: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Williams, Raymond. “Structures of Feeling”. In *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford [England: Oxford University Press, 1977.

1. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) is the Islamist conservative political party founded and led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It is the ruling party in Turkey since 2002. Translation: Justice and Development Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The use of the term “articulation” is indebted to Hall (1986), Laclau (1977), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985). According to these scholars, there is a non-necessary unity, belongingness, linkage, or a connection between ideology, social forces, groups and practices. An example Stuart Hall gives is how religion has no necessary political connotation but gets bound up to the “cultural and ideological underpinning of a particular structure of power” (2019 [1986], 236). This concept will be put to use in my first chapter to explain how the genre “arabesk” came to bear ideological connotations to the conservative AKP regime. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Although music is not the primary concern in Ahıska’s works, the section on musical policies in the early decades of the republic provide important information for music scholars. The book is also helpful to understand the mission and agenda of the Turkish Radio and its role in the construction of national identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In *The Principles of Turkism* (1923), Gökalp suggests that Turkish art music (alternatively, Ottoman classical music) is morbid because the quarter tones are not found in nature and added artificially, and non-national because it was born out of old Greek music. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See O’Connell (2000) for a detailed exploration. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Translation: Popular Culture and the Arabesk of Orhan Gencebay [↑](#footnote-ref-7)