

From Turkey: A social ecology challenge to environmentalism

From social ecologist Cagrideniz Eryilmaz in Turkey:

Social Ecology Challenges Environmentalism: HES Opposition Cases in Turkey



I have completed a sociology dissertation aiming to analyze environmental grassroots movements in Turkey within a frame of social ecology. Hundreds of local movements rose against the construction of thousands of HES [\[1\]](#) (hydroelectric power plants) in the last few years. HES opposition shows new and unique aspects challenging traditional 'environmentalism' in Turkey. Except for the Bergama movement (against a gold mining company, 1990-2005), this was the first time local people developed such numerous grassroots movements throughout the country. Local people, who had not joined any protests in their lives, became pioneers of protest, voicing new slogans like "we will resist for our right to live until the end." Not only did they join the environmental movement but they also used concepts of 'rights of nature' and 'living space' for the first time. The unique difference between traditional urban environmentalism and these local grassroots activities pushed me to write this thesis after years of professional Environmental NGO (ENGO) experience in several areas of Turkey.

Social ecology is necessary in order to analyze this movement, especially through environment/nature and environmentalism/ecology dualities. Only the critique of liberal environmentalism and the radical proposals of Libertarian Municipalism (LM) can uncover dominant urban environmentalism and analyze the significance of the rising environmental grassroots in Turkey. Beyond the scope of social movement literature, social ecological analysis provides insights for the environmental grassroots in terms of ideology, economics, politics, activities, and forms of organization that challenge domination.

Research Objectives: Summary of Findings and Conclusions

My main research question is, “How can HES opposition be analyzed in terms of social ecology?”

In order to achieve my research aim, I divided the thesis into two parts; theoretical work and field study. **The first part is devoted to the development of a classification table (CT).** Current social movements literature focuses on ideology, actions, economics, politics and organizations separately; it cannot generate a holistic analysis in terms of political economy. On the other hand, social ecology criticizes liberal environmentalism, Marxism and deep ecology. Moreover, it develops an alternative LM political program, reaching beyond individual environmental actions, to solve the ecological crisis. Biehl detailed LM

[\[2\]](#)

along with Bookchin, the founder of social ecology, hence I developed a reference model from their work. In order to improve social ecological critiques of liberal environmentalism, Marxism and deep ecology, David Pepper’s classification

[\[3\]](#)

of political philosophies and environmentalism provides a frame, drawing upon O’Riordan’s analysis of ecocentrism and technocentrism

[\[4\]](#)

. However, Pepper’s classification is lacking in the qualities of social ecology and LM that reach beyond an eco-Marxist solution stuck in a human-nature duality and class struggle. I improved upon Pepper’s classification by integrating LM as reference model to generate a classification table

(CT)

to answer a second research question “How can any environmental action be analyzed in terms

of social ecology?”

The second part of the thesis is a field study designed to answer the first and main research question “How can HES opposition be analyzed in terms of social ecology”. The use of CT not only grasps the environmental grassroots movement in Turkey, but also improves itself for further field studies. Although HES opposition is spread throughout Turkey due to almost two thousand HES constructions, I focused on the Black Sea Region where the grassroots movement is most significant and accessible for me. Even though the grassroots movement is similar through the region, I have chosen three fields that are different in terms of organization and politics: a *local ENGO*; a *valley association*

; and

local & regional platforms

of threatened valley citizens. In fact, the regionally networked platforms provide the best model for LM with their regional organization and notions of living space beyond environment. The *valley association*

shows an alternative path of demanding participation in decision-making while having a conservative background, while the

local ENGO

presents a middle class, town-based perspective of participation akin to traditional environmentalism.

In all fields, the struggle introduced a demand to directly participate in decision-making, challenging the top-down, liberal welfare-state model. The various local struggles share civic potential and a critique of market-liberal environmentalism. Among the three organizational forms, the *local ENGO* incorporates many aspects of the welfare-state model with its NGO structure, middle class profile and desire for strict state controls and planning. The member of an ENGO is a citizen of the nation state who forsakes his political will for representative politics. The passive citizen, asking the state to control and regulate the environment, identifies as a member of nation-state society that subsumes himself, in contrast to a LM citizen of an ecocommunity. The support of the *local ENGO* is significant to local people claiming their living space despite these limitations.

The *valley association* has more LM aspects than the *local ENGO* with its temporary, non-official and citizen-based union structure and its claim for living space. Apolitical residents satisfied with the representative system ask for participation in decision-making mechanism at the local scale, however this remains limited to the water issue. The welfare-state model is challenged by a LM that desires direct participation of citizens.

Platforms

express more LM aspects than other two models due to the numerous platforms acting together, forming a regional confederation, and demanding decision-making beyond the water

issue. Local people struggle against HES constructions as *defending life*

, linking their life with nature as LM states. Not only elites but also women, youth and others can join the actions and decision-making. During this process, apolitical residents become active citizens of their community defending their living space. Each individual becomes a political actor within an ecocommunity that provides a political realm where both citizen and ecocommunity coexist in living space. The bottom-up civic organization is not limited to local platforms but reaches a regional scale to form a confederated structure. Forming a regional *platform*

body is necessary for communities to support each other while the local platforms decide for themselves.

HES opposition in Turkey shows a potential to ignite directly democratic processes and indicates how LM processes can be advanced where a shared public threat raises a compelling ecocommunity issue.

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[1] HES is the Turkish abbreviation for hydroelectric power plant (*hidroelektrik santral*).

[2] Biehl, Janet & Murray Bookchin, 1998. *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism*. Montréal: Black Rose.

[3] His classification has five categories: traditional conservatives, market liberals, welfare liberals, democratic socialist and revolutionary socialist. Pepper, David, 1995 *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*. New York: Routledge.

[4] O'Riordan, T. 1989. "The Challenge for Environmentalism", in Peet, R and Thrift, N. (eds), *New Models in Geography*, London: Unwin Hyman, 77-102.

<http://social-ecology.org/wp/2012/03/from-turkey-a-social-ecology-challenge-to-environmentalism/>