

The End of Islamic Liberalism?

August 22, 2017



THE FALL OF
THE TURKISH MODEL
How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism
CIHAN TUĞAL



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

In the short time since the 2016 publication of Cihan Tuğal's *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, Turkey has endured an attempted coup, nearly a year of rule under a state of emergency, the widespread repression of dissent through imprisonment and mass firings of teachers and civil servants, and a (likely fraudulent) referendum that has institutionalized the autocratic rule of President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan. Yet, unbelievable as it may seem, these developments are part of a continuum rather than a rupture, and Tuğal's book is essential—if not unproblematic—reading for understanding contemporary politics in Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa.

The Fall of the Turkish Model (hereafter *FTM*) can be read as a sequel to Tuğal's 2009 book, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*. In this earlier work Tuğal analyzed the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey through a Gramscian lens, arguing that in the early twenty-first century the AKP successfully absorbed a populist, anticapitalist Islamic ideology prominent in Turkey (and elsewhere) in the 1990s. In this war of position the neoliberal AKP was able to establish its hegemony in part through the appropriation of revolutionary discourses and strategies that in practice reinforced existing patterns of domination—hence a *passive* revolution. The party's ostensible commitment to liberal democratic norms, free markets, and "moderate Islam" turned Turkey into a Middle Eastern poster child for mainstream Western commentators and policymakers—hence the "Turkish model."

As its title suggests, *FTM* analyzes the failure of the Turkish model (or "Islamic liberalism"). Deploying a comparative sociological method that discusses Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran, Tuğal claims the "Arab revolts of 2011-13...pulled the rug from under the feet of the Turkish regime," as hopes for the creation of liberal Islamic regimes throughout the region failed to materialize after 2011. In the wake of the Arab Spring's implosion, the Turkish state's suppression of the Gezi uprising in the summer of 2013 revealed the authoritarian underpinnings of the AKP government, and exposed the undemocratic tendencies of "Islamic actors" when they are undermined or challenged.

A key argument of *FTM* is that, contrary to most mainstream accounts, the failure of the Turkish model and the growth of authoritarianism in Turkey has not been a result of Erdoğan's dictatorial ambitions or an essentialist "Turkish culture." Rather, the emergence of the increasingly authoritarian state is attributable to the process of liberalization itself. A virtue of such an orientation according to Tuğal is that it points to the "structural and conjunctural (as well as cultural) dynamics" behind the crisis in Islamic liberalism. *FTM* claims—somewhat confusingly—that the "neoliberal-liberal democratic model" was the central cause of Turkey's crisis, and it was therefore the Turkish model itself that "allowed Erdoğan's authoritarianism to pass as democratic during the last ten years."

To explain the rise and fall of the Turkish model Tuğal deploys what he calls a "Political Society-Based Explanation," the key theoretical contribution of *FTM*. According to this conception civil society groups cannot bring about substantial social transformation without the aid of "political society"—defined in *FTM* as "a field of actors and organizations that have comprehensive social visions." These are often political parties, but they can also be groups and organizations more difficult to classify, especially in "dynamic situations." Civil society actors pursue sectional interests or specific issues, whereas political society actors seek to regulate the totality of social life—even if this regulation leans in an ostensibly liberal direction, as with the early AKP. In Tuğal's view, a primary virtue of an approach that stresses the contingencies involved in a passive revolution effected by political society is that in it the "lines between state and society, the elite and the people, are drawn and redrawn continuously."

FTM argues that in the context of the Middle East, Turkey was uniquely situated for liberalization; the Turkish model was therefore never a realistically exportable product. In the 1960s and 1970s Islamists across the Middle East and North Africa held similar religious and political views, while neoliberal reforms were enacted throughout the region in the 1980s and 1990s. Economic liberalization was most pronounced in Turkey, however, and the phenomenal growth of the Turkish economy in the early 2000s under the AKP was a primary reason for Western pundits' enthusiastic support for the Turkish model. By contrast, liberalization in Egypt and Iran was uneven and sporadic, and both countries have been unable to completely break with a corporatist past. Tunisia's initial turn toward liberalism was thwarted by an increasingly authoritarian state, made possible in large part by the relative political weakness of Tunisian Islamists.

Only in Turkey did a unified and professionalized political society, along with relatively democratic political structures, exist. A military coup in 1980 crushed the left, while in the coup's aftermath concessions to religious groups (historically repressed by the Kemalist security state) allowed an opening to Islamists in order to defuse the appeal of revolutionary Iran. As the state was slowly reformed along neoliberal lines the Welfare Party (RP), heir to Islamist parties previously shut down by the Turkish military, increased its popularity in the 1980s and 1990s with an anticapitalist and anti-Western discourse rooted in a corporatist religious doctrine.

After the RP was forced out of power in 1997 and dissolved the following year, the AKP was created by former RP member Tayyip Recep Erdoğan. More socially and culturally flexible than the austere RP, the new Islamist AKP took a softer stance toward Islamic law, the rights of women, alcohol, and abandoned the RP's anticapitalist orientation. Thus the stage was set for a hegemonic project that appropriated the radical language of the anti-Western party and movement while adopting neoliberal economic policies—a liberalized Islamism with broad popular support.

FTM's comparative discussion of the impacts of economic reform in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey are enlightening. Turkey's more thorough embrace of a capitalist model of growth made it possible for the country to surpass others in the region in GDP—yet these policies also made Turkey more vulnerable to the global recession of 2008. While absolute poverty has declined inequality has

increased along with unemployment and precarious work. And though the expansion of social welfare to include previously excluded groups has been a major contributor to the AKP's popular appeal, workers have suffered as union density has plummeted while work deaths have skyrocketed. Moreover, in many indicators of development—unemployment, education expenditure, expected years of schooling—Turkey has fared worse than others. In short, the Turkish economic model “has led to a phenomenal increase in wealth, but not to a better life for the citizenry at large.”

Tuğal also provides an insightful comparison of the Arab Spring in North Africa (though readers interested in the impact of workers' movements on the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt should read Joel Beinin's *Workers and Thieves*). While according to Tuğal militants in Egypt and Tunisia shared four central slogans—bread, social justice, freedom, and dignity—the left in both countries was ultimately unable to lead the revolutionary movements, and as we know the result was failure and conservative reaction. The absence of an organized left capable of taking the lead in the revolutionary institution-building process opened the field for passive revolutionaries and others with conservative or narrow agendas.

In Turkey, it was the Gezi uprising in the summer of 2013 that led to the ultimate breakdown of Islamic liberalism as the state's suppression of the anti-government movement revealed the AKP's authoritarian tendencies. Yet while *FTM*'s conceptualization of the AKP's passive revolution in the early 2000s is convincing, the book's analysis of Gezi and what it portends for leftist strategy is problematic.

The Gezi movement began as a protest against the destruction of Gezi Park in Istanbul, which Tuğal sees as resistance to the neoliberal commodification of urban space. After a violent police response to park occupiers the revolt spread across the nation and incorporated a wide variety of groups and political orientations. While the revolt was certainly multiclass, *FTM* points to evidence protesters tended to be relatively well-educated while general support for the movement came disproportionately from the middle and upper classes. In fact, the “new middle class” conspicuous in the movement was in fact the same group that benefited from economic liberalization over the previous decade.

Since *FTM*'s primary argument is that the AKP's version of neoliberalism directly led to Gezi, evidence that the movement was largely led by those who profited from liberalization's effects creates logical problems. How does *FTM* explain this paradox? Tuğal attempts to resolve the problem by pointing to the “contradictions at the heart of neoliberalism: it leads to a socially stifling world even for the groups it enriches.” If the Turkish model was at least temporarily successful in appeasing large sections of the urban poor through welfare distribution, the dissatisfaction of the new middle classes is fatal to Islamic liberalism, since “their boring life is what the model holds in store for the imagined future of these strata across the region.”

For a work as analytically sophisticated as *FTM*, to say nothing of its materialist orientation, the claim that what ultimately brought down Islamic liberalism was a nebulous lack of social fulfillment among a new middle class is unsatisfying. Tuğal might have drawn on Marx's theorization of capital's tendency to constantly produce new, unsatisfied needs among workers (even the relatively privileged)—a concept usefully developed in a number of recent works by Michael Lebowitz. He could also have discussed high levels of unemployment among newly-educated groups with new social aspirations across the region in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu's invaluable theories of economic, social, and cultural capital. In any case, while Tuğal provides fascinating information regarding the revolt's development, the causes of Gezi remain undertheorized.

More concretely, a deeper discussion of the inextricable relationship between economic and sociocultural issues (the AKP's obsessive focus on the nuclear family and women's subordination, a

paternalist/corporatist evisceration of organized labor, attacks on “non-Turkish” cultural spaces and institutions, and the general limiting of democratic freedoms) would have made for a richer, and ultimately more convincing, explanation of the revolt. While Tuğal is clearly knowledgeable about the “cultural” conflicts that have infused Turkish society in recent years, he unconvincingly marginalizes them in favor of an economistic interpretation of Gezi.

A second, and related, problem concerns what the analysis portends for leftist strategy in Turkey, the region, and the world. *FTM* is not a work of socialist strategy, and it may seem unfair to criticize a book for not doing what its author never intended to do. Nevertheless, it is disconcerting that a Gramscian analysis of the failure of a major rightist movement is largely lacking in ideas for a new war of position. Tuğal seems to imply that what is needed on the left is its own “political society,” an organization (or party?) that transcends mere civil society groups. How this is supposed to come about is not seriously addressed, other than to suggest “A slow process of political maturation and ideological co-education (an interactive education, where intellectuals and masses are simultaneously transformed),” along with the building of cooperatives and other post-capitalist institutions.

This vagueness regarding strategy is at odds with Tuğal’s frustration with anarchist tendencies prominent among the left in recent decades. The concept of “leaderless revolutions,” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion of the “multitude,” and the “beautification of unorganized masses, a romanticization now in high fashion,” all contributed to the left’s failure to seize revolutionary initiative in Tuğal’s view. While it is certainly the case that organization and the need to confront state power are essential in the present—truly frightening—political conjuncture, ridiculing the straw man of postmodern anarchism will not take us very far.

As a dense and scholarly work, *FTM* is a book for academics, and Tuğal’s prescriptions are directed towards leftist intellectuals. Yet as Erdoğan and the AKP intensify the repression of journalists and academics while at the same time concentrating political power, the notion of “political maturation and ideological co-education” seems increasingly distant and disconnected from reality. By contrast, grassroots political mobilization guided by demands for elemental democratic freedoms are the immediate essential organizational tasks for the left.

These criticisms aside, *FTM* is a major work of Marxist sociopolitical analysis that deserves attention and further discussion. This review, with its disproportionate focus on Turkey, has not done justice to the comparative expertise Tuğal brings, and readers will learn much from the book about recent political history and revolutionary movements in Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, and especially Turkey. By analyzing in fascinating detail the failure of Islamic liberalism Tuğal helps create a framework in which a new, more just, social and political vision can be articulated. Just as in the 1990s the RP in Turkey appropriated leftist methods of organization and an anticapitalist ideology, so might the left learn from the mistakes and failures of the pseudo-populist right.