



# What comes after repression? The hegemonic contestation in the gold-mining field in Turkey

Hayriye Özen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Şükrü Özen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Atılım University, 06836 Incek, Ankara, Turkey

<sup>b</sup> Department of Business Administration, İzmir University of Economics, 35330 Balçova, İzmir, Turkey



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## ABSTRACT

It is widely known that many local environmental mobilizations against resource extraction projects of transnational capital have been repressed by the use of the state force in the late-industrializing world. What is less known is the aftermath of these repressions. Do they conceal all the traces of these mobilizations and lead to naturalization of the extractive operations of transnational capital at the local spaces? We address this question by examining two subsequent local environmental mobilizations in Turkey against gold-mining MNCs. Drawing on Laclauian insights on political struggles and hegemony, we first conceptualize repression of dissent not only as the repression of dissidents or protesters, but also that of protest discourse. Then, we argue that the forceful repression of the actors of those mobilizations succeeding to articulate an appealing protest discourse can make the hegemony and domination of transnational capital at the local level highly fragile, thus providing the conditions of possibility of subsequent similar mobilizations. The protest discourse constituted through such mobilizations may sediment despite the repression of protesters and become highly influential on the discursive trajectory of subsequent mobilizations. Yet, such an influence, as we also demonstrate in this study, may not only enable subsequent movements, but also limit their hegemonic capabilities.

## 1. Introduction

Since the neoliberal transformation of the world capitalism, intense local mobilizations and protests have emerged almost all over the globe against operations of multinational capital. A majority of these clashes concern the issue of the negative environmental impact of extracting natural resources, such as oil, coal, copper, iron ore, or gold in the late-industrializing world, which is committed to extractive industrial growth as a development strategy (Bebbington et al., 2008; Bebbington, 2011; Gerber, 2011; Kumar, 2014; Martinez-Alier, 2014). In their attempt to clear the way to the operation of extractive multinational companies (MNCs), the response of corporate, state and non-state actors to these local mobilizations involved both consent-seeking and coercive practices. The former included corporate social responsibility practices, community consultations, participatory environmental monitoring, and community-engagement practices (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Himley, 2014; Mayes et al., 2014; Özkaynak et al., 2015; Sadler and Lloyd, 2009; Walter and Urkidi, 2017), whereas the latter included the use of repressive state force (Banerjee, 2011; Gerber, 2011; Jaskoski, 2014; Özkaynak et al., 2012, 2015; Pedersen, 2014). While the impact of consent-seeking practices on local communities has

attracted some scholarly attention (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Bustos et al., 2017; Haalboom, 2012; Himley, 2014; Mayes et al., 2014; Walter and Urkidi, 2017), the impact of repression on local mobilizations, communities, and other mobilizations remained largely unexplored. What happens after repression? Does repression conceal all the traces of these mobilizations and naturalize extraction of resources by MNCs? Do protesters remain totally silent to the operations of such MNCs after their resistance is obstructed, or do they continue to express their discontent in other ways and through other outlets? Moreover, do these mobilizations influence the emergence or unfolding of other movements against MNCs? If so, in what ways and with what consequences?

This study addresses these questions by examining anti-gold mining mobilizations in Turkey. The very first mobilization against the operations of gold-mining MNCs, which emerged in the 1990s in the town of Bergama, managed to articulate an anti-gold-mining discourse at the national level, attracting popular attention to the negative environmental impact of gold-mining and gaining a nationwide public sympathy to their resistance (Özen, 2009). Alarmed by the unexpected popularity of this pioneering movement, a group of pro-mining actors articulated a pro-mining discourse and carried out a number of activities to promote the Ovacık goldmine in Bergama. The pro-mining

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [hayriye.ozen@atilim.edu.tr](mailto:hayriye.ozen@atilim.edu.tr) (H. Özen), [ozen.sukru@ieu.edu.tr](mailto:ozen.sukru@ieu.edu.tr) (Ş. Özen).

discourse managed to establish a partial hegemony in the sense of gaining the consent of the general public and some locals, but not those locals mobilized against the mine. This partial hegemony was tried to be completed with the use of coercion against those who resisted mine operations at the local level. Approaching the early 2000s, these people were silenced and, accordingly, the protests in Bergama were over, the gold-mining MNC started to operate the Ovacık goldmine, and some other MNCs were preparing to operate goldmines in other places. Within a few years, however, some other anti-gold mining mobilizations, which were highly similar to the Bergama movement in terms of protest discourse and actions, were organized in other local settings such as Eşme, Efemçükuru, Kaz Dağları, Niğde and Fatsa.

We specifically focus on the question of why and how a seemingly repressed movement remained so influential. To pursue these questions, we, first, broaden the concept of repression of dissent. By drawing on the insights that Ernesto Laclau provided with his conceptualization of hegemony and political struggles (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), we conceptualize repression of movements not only as the repression of protesting actors, as most of the studies focusing on mobilization-repression nexus tend to do, but also as the repression of *protest discourses*.

Employing this broadened concept of repression of dissent, we examine the impact of the repressed Bergama movement on the subsequent one emerged in Eşme. Our primary intention was not to compare two cases to reveal the influences of spatiotemporal factors on the two struggles, but to trace, by taking spatiotemporal factors into account, the discursive trajectory from the Bergama case to the Eşme case for the purpose of developing theoretical arguments about the effect of repression on environmental mobilizations. We argue that the forceful repression of the actors of the Bergama movement, which succeeded to articulate an appealing protest discourse, has made the hegemony of pro-mining discourse and the domination of gold-mining MNC at the local level highly fragile, thus providing the conditions of possibility of subsequent similar mobilizations. We also argue that, despite the repression of the protesters, the Bergama movement strongly influenced both the discursive trajectory and the hegemonic capability of the subsequent Eşme movement. This shows us that not only hegemonic, but also counter-hegemonic discourses or protest discourses – despite the repression of protest actors – may sediment in a field, providing a paradigm for subsequent struggles. Yet, this sedimentation of protest discourse and its re-articulation by subsequent struggles may produce highly different consequences for the new movement than its precursor in terms of its hegemonic capability.

The empirical data of the study was collected using documents and in-depth interviews. The documentary data sources comprised books and reports published by the leading figures of the two protest movements (see, e.g., Akdemir, 2011; Cangı, 2002; Özey, 2003; Sakaryalı, 2011; Taşkın, 1998), bulletin of MNC in Bergama, the websites of both the protesters ([www.geocities.com/siyanurlealtin](http://www.geocities.com/siyanurlealtin); [www.egecep.org.tr](http://www.egecep.org.tr)) and the companies ([www.ovacik.altin.com](http://www.ovacik.altin.com); [www.tuprag.com.tr](http://www.tuprag.com.tr)), the journal published by *Altın Madencileri Derneği* (AMD) – the Association of Gold-Miners –, and the media news which appeared in the national daily newspapers. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by both authors during field visits in July 2004, May 2005 in Bergama, and August and September 2010 in Eşme both with leading protesters and locals. As to the Eşme case, we also conducted interviews with two managers of the gold-mining MNC in charge of local affairs and public relations.

In the following sections, in order to form the conceptual grammar that we use in analyzing the Bergama and Eşme cases, we first conceptualize repression of dissent by drawing on Laclauian insights. Following an account of the Bergama movement by focusing, first, on its national expansion and, then, its repression, we examine the Eşme case regarding how the ‘repressed’ Bergama movement influenced this subsequent movement in the gold-mining field. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion of the implications of our arguments.

## 2. Repression of protest movements

The mobilization-repression nexus has been mainly dealt with in those studies focusing on protests and social movements (see Boudreau, 2004; Davenport et al., 2005; della Porta et al., 2006; Flesher Fominaya and Wood, 2011). These studies have rightly argued that repression goes hand-in-hand with protests and social movements since it is one of, and perhaps the easiest, ways of silencing and discouraging dissent and dissidents and, in this way, governing the economic and political order (Peterson and Wahlström, 2015). Yet, this literature predominantly focuses on the repression of protesters, dissidents, or activists, dealing both with visible (Flesher Fominaya and Wood, 2011) and invisible (Earl, 2003; Fernandez, 2008; Oliver, 2008; Ullrich and Wollinger, 2011; Williams, 2011) forms of repression of protesters. However, in silencing dissent, the use of repressive measures against movement actors is only one side of the story. The other side, as we argue in this study, is the repression of alternative – or counter-hegemonic – discourses articulated by movements. A great deal of repressive attempts of power holders is directed toward this end. Although the repression of protesters and the repression of protests discourse are related to one another and one way of repressing a protest discourse is to silence protesters, there are also those ways that attempt to repress a discourse by illegitimizing, discrediting, or even antagonizing it.

We use the Laclauian insights on political struggles and hegemony to broaden the concept of repression in a way to include the repression of alternative or counter-hegemonic discourses besides the repression of protest actors. On the basis of an anti-foundationalist ontology and anti-essentialist epistemology, Laclau argues that ‘social’ has an open and contingent nature, and is temporarily, partially and relatively constituted through political struggles striving to attain hegemony, which simply refers to the ability of a particular political project to temporarily fix the meanings and, thereby, shape the practices in a certain social field by making its own definitions dominant. A political project or a discourse will have such an ability insofar as it represents many possible forms of social demands and interests and, accordingly, gain the consent of many social groups, and represses other alternative discourses, which also try to hegemonize the same field. In fact, from the Laclauian perspective, the representation of different social demands and interests and the repression of rival discourses in the hegemonic struggle are one and the same process (see Laclau, 1990: 171–173). For instance, a discourse that represents the demand for economic development represses or radically excludes environmental discourses involving demands for environmental protection since its existence requires the non-existence of the latter. Thus, the hegemony of a discourse in a social field will always be predicated on the radical exclusion or repression of some other possible alternative discourses. Moreover, it will be strong to the extent that it conceals the exclusion of other alternatives.

The broadened concept of repression provides us not only a more nuanced understanding of repression, but also a better understanding of its consequences. As to the latter, it particularly helps us direct our attention to the impact of the repression of a movement on the emergence and trajectory of *subsequent* mobilizations. It shows that a movement, whose actors are mostly repressed, may still be influential on the generation of subsequent mobilizations by providing them with discursive materials to articulate. Put differently, it indicates that the constitution of a weak hegemony in a field, one that is mostly based on the repression of the protesters, may provide the conditions for the emergence of subsequent mobilizations. As Laclau (1990) argues, the constitution of a hegemony of a discourse on the basis of a radical exclusion or repression of a rival discourse produces an antagonistic relation between the two. Depending on its strength, the hegemonic discourse will be vulnerable to the challenge of the antagonistic party, that is, the excluded one. If a strong hegemony, one that is based more on the consent of wider social segments, is established ‘a forgetting of the origins’ tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to

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