Development through design: Knowledge, power, and absences in the making of southeastern Turkey

Zeynep S. Akıncı[a,*], Arda Bilgen[b], Antònia Casellas[c], Joost Jongerden[d]

[a] Grup d'Estudis en Mobilitat, Transport i Territori (GEMOTT), Departament de Geografia, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Edifici B, Campus de Bellaterra, 08193 Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain
[b] Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610. USA
[c] Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Departament de Geografia, Edifici B. Campus UAB, 08193 Bellaterra, (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Barcelona, Spain
[d] Wageningen University & Kyoto University, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The Foucauldian concept of power-knowledge has been a useful lens to study the idea, discourse, and practice of development. Since the 1980s, many scholars have employed this critical framework to unearth the overlooked power relations created and altered by the concept of development in general, and development projects in particular. This article contributes to this debate by advancing and enriching this perspective. Analyzing a broad number of official sources supporting Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, GAP) and drawing theoretically on the concept of power of Michel Foucault and absences of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, we argue that GAP is part of a state strategy to produce southeastern Turkey by design and the representation of lack. We develop a framework that helps us understand the narratives on the project as a design of absences, a design-power that works as a particular form of power-knowledge. In the terrain of absences, design has become the way to exercise power together with the observation of geography and population. The absences created by the development discourse become a key-feature of design-power. In this sense, GAP is design-power to produce a new region and new subjectivities and works as a particular form of power-knowledge.

1. Introduction

As political and technological assemblies that combine hydro-electrical and agricultural interventions with centralized bureaucracy, dams have been conceived and utilized as material agents of central administration and modern state power (Mitchell, 2002; Menga, 2015). The Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, GAP) is one of the most comprehensive development projects in the world. With its 75,000 km² of surface area and 8.7 million people, the GAP region (see Fig. 1)[1] continues to constitute around 10% of the total surface and population in Turkey by 2018 (GAP-BKİ, 2018, p. 8), and it is being populated mostly by the Kurds (Gökçe et al., 2010, pp. 37–38). Turkey started GAP as a water and land resources development project in the 1970s involving the construction of 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric power plants (HPPs), and irrigation schemes to annually produce 27 billion kWh of energy and irrigate 1.8 million hectares (ha) of land (GAP-BKİ,

2018, p. 1). Over the different decades, scholars have argued that GAP can *inter alia* be understood as one of the key instruments employed by the Turkish state in dealing with the long-standing and ongoing Kurdish issue (Nestor, 1996; Özok-Gündoğan, 2005; Jongerden, 2010; Bilgen, 2018a). In this sense, GAP's underlying logic is that a socio-economic development of the region would take care of the Kurdish issue, which is conceptualized as an expression of "backwardness" (*geri kalmışlık*) and "ignorance" (*cehalet*). According to social scientists employed or supported by GAP, the introduction of irrigation would modernize the region and promote market integration while concurrently reducing the prevalence and impact of tribal relations and extended family networks. In the course of this process, Kurds would simply turn into Turks (Jongerden, 2010). While this literature is indeed rich and suggestive (see Bilgen, 2018c), we extend these perspectives on GAP by arguing that the foundations of the project are also built on design-power as a form of power-knowledge.

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: zeynepsila.akinci@uab.cat (Z.S. Akıncı), ardabilgen@gmail.com (A. Bilgen), antonia.casellas@uab.cat (A. Casellas), joost.jongerden@wur.nl (J. Jongerden).
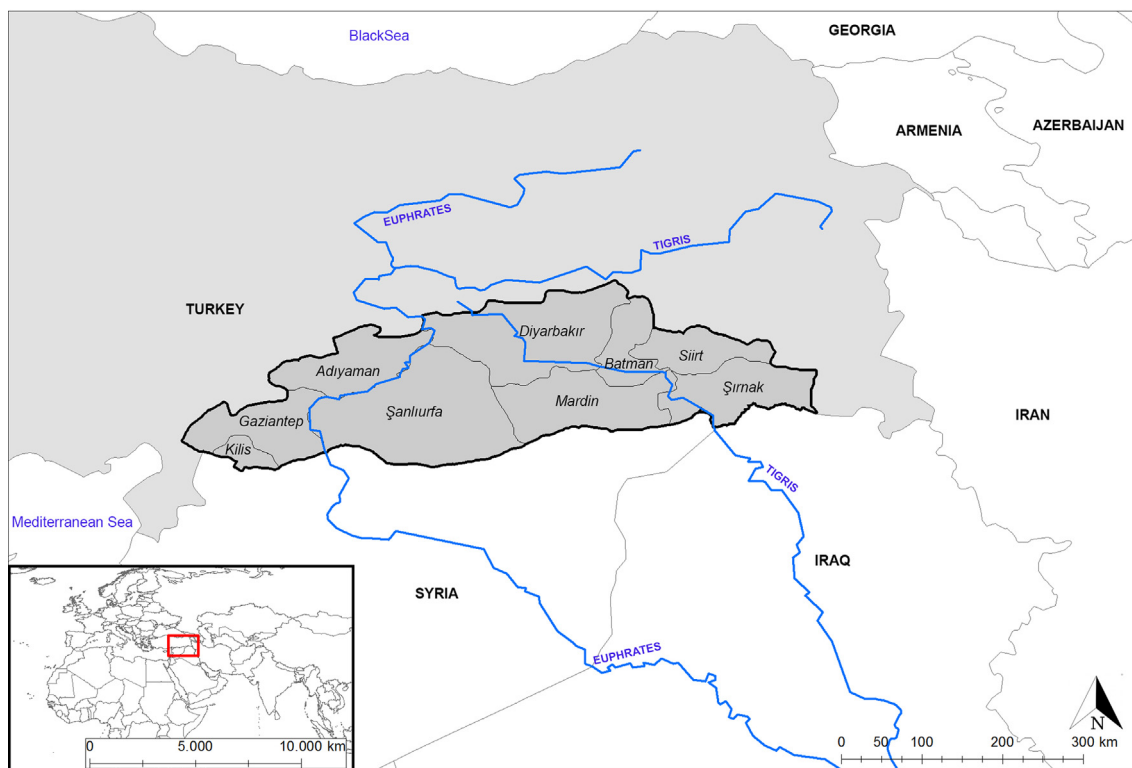
Fig. 1. Map of the GAP region.

Drawing on the influences from Michel Foucault (1980), thinkers have relied on the guidance of the nexus between power and knowledge when inquiring on the idea, discourse, and practice of development, including those concerning large-scale development projects (Escobar, 1984; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007; Ziai, 2016). In this thinking, power and knowledge are mutually constitutive. Government is performed, and power is exercised, through knowledge. In his later works, Foucault discusses power-knowledge in the context of governmentality—an effort to shape human conduct through calculated means (Li, 2007, p. 5). Defined as the "conduct of conduct", "to govern" refers to structuring the field of possible actions of others in the political, economic, and social spheres (Foucault, 1982, p. 221, as cited in Ziai, 2016, p. 17). Unlike disciplinary and coercive forms of power, government operates through "educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs" and setting artificial conditions in such a way that people are guided to do what they are expected to do without being necessarily aware of how their conduct is being conducted from a distance (Li, 2007, p. 5). In his work on madness, Foucault (2006) describes how the production of knowledge about madness produces a field in which subject positions and new power relations between the "expert" and the "mad" are created. As he argues elsewhere (Elders, 2012), knowledge is related not only to domination and exploitation, but also to marginalization and exclusion: "[T]he universality of our knowledge has been acquired at the cost of exclusions, bans, denials, rejections, at the price of a kind of cruelty with regard to any reality" (p. 14). In other words, exclusion is at the roots of our knowledge, and the co-relation power-knowledge is actually a trinity among knowledge, power, and exclusion.

In this article, we discuss GAP in the matrix of power-knowledge-exclusion, and further link Foucault's power-knowledge with the concept of "sociology of absences" which Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001) defines as "the procedure through which what does not exist, or whose existence is socially ungraspable or inexpressible, is conceived of as the active result of a given social process" (p. 191). We bridge these approaches to analyze the official discourse on the GAP region, and

identify how the Turkish state's design of the region is constructed on exclusions, bans, denials, and rejections as well as it is based on knowledge and power. We contend that it is design based on the production of absences, and relatedly exclusion and denial in Foucauldian terms, as a form of productive power in terms of inscribing the state's administration in the region.

The article begins with a theoretical framework that explains the "absences" and its relation to the hegemonic development project and state power. This is followed by a methods section that explains the approach and steps taken in the research process. It follows the analysis of how a region is "made" through design-power, and concludes with an overall discussion.

2. The justification of development through the creation of absences

Since the birth of development as a political goal and a field of study in the late 1940s, there is little consensus as to whether development has been a successful or a failed project. While some have praised the development project for saving millions of people from starvation and providing them with new opportunities, others have denounced it for failing to eliminate poverty and causing environmental and cultural destruction (Rapley, 2008, p. 177). In the 1990s, some already wrote the "obituary" of development (Sachs, 1992, p. 1) or referred to the concept as an "unburied corpse" (Esteva, 1992, p. 6). As an approach, development was reduced to the idea of a linear improvement that involves a process of evolution from lower stages of human conditions towards higher stages (Leys, 1996, p. 65). The development project had Eurocentric implications for it was portraying non-Western societies as inferior, primitive, indigenous, backward, and deficient (DuBois, 1991; Eriksson Baaz, 1999) and engendering "a sense of inferiority" (Kothari, 2002, p. 37; Escobar 1995, p. 10). This "colonial gaze" (Fanon, 1962), however, was also part and parcel of how the so-called non-Western modernizing regimes conceived part of the populations within their border. Development of the nation came to be referred to as "internal

colonization" (Jongerden, 2007).

According to Santos (2005), through the production of such dichotomies, the metonymic reason—the one that takes a part for the whole—produces a hierarchy such as between the North-South, the West-East, man-woman, culture-nature, scientific knowledge-traditional knowledge, and developed-underdeveloped that "does not allow one of the parts to have its own existence" (p. 156). Through the concept of "the sociology of absences", Santos stresses that what "does not exist is, in reality, actively produced as non-existent" (p. 160). In this sense, we can as well argue that the development project produces "absences" that need to be overcome. Santos (2004) identifies five logics, which derive from five "monocultures" through which modern science—and the notions of rationality and efficiency as its fundamental conceptions—produce forms of "non-existence" that promote the idea and practice of development as a rational response. Accordingly, *the monoculture of knowledge* turns scientific knowledge and high culture into the only criteria of truth and aesthetic quality, respectively. Everything that falls outside this realm is declared non-existent, which in this case appears in the form of ignorance. *The monoculture of linear time* rests on the idea that history has a linear direction and that developed countries are ahead of, or more progressive than, underdeveloped countries. In this formulation, whatever represents the opposite of forward is declared backward and, thus, non-existent. *The monoculture of classification* relates to the naturalization of differences. When, for instance, populations are distributed according to categories that conceal hierarchical power dynamics, non-existence appears in the form of inferiority and subordination. *The monoculture of the universal and the global* is related to the logic of dominant scale. In this context, non-existence is produced by the rendering of the local and particular as an inferior or noncredible alternative to what exists globally and universally. Finally, *the monoculture of capitalist productivity and efficiency* is based on the idea of privileging growth via market forces, which applies both to nature and work. Here the non-existence is produced in the form of being non-productive, as it is being sterile in nature or lacking skills in work. These monocultures create five social forms of absence—the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the non-productive—that require development by the scientific, advanced, superior, global, or productive realities. They not only justify exogenous development interventions, but also reproduce a narrow understanding of the economy.

At this point, it is useful to draw on the works of Timothy Mitchell (1998, 2002, 2008) that analyze power and underline the need to reinterpret the rule of expertise and economy. In his study of British colonization in Egypt, Mitchell (1998) links the understanding of colonization to power by highlighting the conflict over the control of representation and reality between the British power and its Egyptian subjects—with their traditions, economic practices, and culture. He questions traditional assumptions by redefining the process of colonization as "a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real" (p. ix). Basing his arguments on the study of land reform programs in Egypt in the 1950s, he challenges the narrative of capitalist market in order to highlight the complexity and variation of the Egyptian countryside which the capitalist understanding of economic relations and practices fail to capture. Thus, Mitchell calls into question the existence of what is accepted as the materialization of the modern idea of the economy and underlines that "the economy is better seen as a project, or a series of competing projects, of rival attempts to establish metrological regimes, based upon new technologies of organization, measurement, calculation, and representation" (p. 1120). In other words, Mitchell sees the economy as a performative project instead of a transcendental given for it could be open to a different performance and measurements (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

If the aforementioned dominant Eurocentric understanding of the economy gives legitimacy and control to modern knowledge and technology, this control further takes place by a process of standardization and legibility of the landscape that helps to consolidate a strategy of nation-building (Scott, 1998). The premodern state was "partially blind" in terms of control; it lacked "a map" that displayed details about its terrain and its subjects (p. 2). Early modern European statecraft, on the other hand, aimed at making the "social hieroglyph" legible and standardized in order to enable the simplification of societal complexities and enhancement of the state capacity. As also put by Katja Mielke and Conrad Schetter (2007), the nation state had a natural interest and tendency to "map the land owned by the state and its citizens exactly" and bind "each citizen to the smallest fixed territorial unit possible in order to identify and localize him/her whenever it [felt] this [was] necessary" to achieve a high degree of control over its territory and population (p. 72). The concept of legibility can be understood as the capability of being read or deciphered (Scott, 1998, pp. 2–54). In close relation to legibility, the concept of standardization is an ideal of attaining bureaucratic homogeneity and uniformity to easily monitor, count, assess, and manage nature and people. The modern state envisages to engineer—or the mastery of—nature and the material environment as a means to produce population. Planning, in this context, is a key component of modern statecraft with the backbone schemas, the modern maps. The standardized measures and metrics are supposed to help the state produce homogeneous, legible, and thus easily controllable spaces and citizens, indicated on pieces of paper. Planning, as many other state projects, depends on ambitious schemes of modern order and high-modernist scientific knowledge. It implies a "truly radical break with history and tradition" (p. 93) and is used "to give modernity a shape" as observed in Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation of Paris in the 19th century (Clark, 1991, as cited in Scott, 1998, p. 62). This desire to give a shape is legitimized through the "blessed" words of engineers, planners, technocrats, architects, scientists, and visionaries—those who supposedly possess the right kind of knowledge to solve the complexities of nature and societies as well as to build a legible and predictable future (Pınarcıoğlu & Işık, 2004, p. 20).

James Scott (1998) refers to this as high-modernism, "a strong (…) version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress that were associated with industrialization in Western Europe and in North America" (p. 89). With a "supreme self-confidence", it is a vision of how the technical and scientific progress—through the state—could be applied in every field of human activity (p. 90). It includes continued linear progress, developing scientific and technical knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, and an increased control over people and their landscape. Thus, the simplified, utilitarian descriptions of state officials (like maps) are then transformed into high-modern prescriptions (like plans), garnished by scientific and technical knowledge. In this sense, the high-modernist ideology is the "ideal soil for authoritarian pretensions" (p. 245) because making a society legible allows for engaging in large-scale social engineering. Social engineering, in this context, corresponds to the attempts not only to put individuals in a rational order, as the traditional understanding of the economy does, but also to shape and control their environment, belongings, and ways of living. Society, on the other hand, is conceived as a "raw material" to be transformed into a better product while individuals are conceived as "tabula rasa" to be transformed into "governable" subjects. Some of these "well-intended schemes to improve the human condition", however, "have gone so tragically awry" (p. 4) and failed to yield the expected results.

3. Methodology

The empirical data is part of two research projects on GAP conducted in two complementary periods: between 2012–2017 and 2017–2018. The data collection includes literature review, archival research, and semi-structured interviews. Initially, primary, secondary, and anecdotal sources including journal articles, grey literature, reports, news articles, and online sources on the project were reviewed to acquire an empirical awareness and insight. Next, 568 relevant proceedings of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) dating to

between 1975 and 2014 were reviewed as they reflect the power dynamics within and between the elites in the Turkish political system (Loizides, 2009, p. 282). Adding to this process, 315 documents including, but not limited to, action plans, final situation reports, sector reports, and workshop proceedings from the archives of the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP-BKİ) were examined. Finally, based on purposive, snowball, and sequential sampling techniques, 64 participants—28 members of parliament at TBMM, 18 employees from GAP-BKİ, six employees from the State Planning Organization (DPT)/ Ministry of Development, five academicians, four employees from the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (DSİ), two large landowners, and one director from the media industry—were interviewed in Ankara and Urfa. One-quarter of the participants were female.

Understanding discourse as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995, p. 44), we used (qualitative) content analysis and (critical) discourse analysis to analyze our data. Our goal is to uncover the way that reality is produced, considering that words "frame our perceptions and thoughts, and affect our mind-sets, ways of ordering our world, and actions" (Alfini & Chambers, 2010, p. 30) and that discourses concern power relations, constitute society and culture, relate to ideologies, and represent a form of social action (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271–280, as cited in Van Dijk, 2001, p. 353). Within this frame, first we (re-)formulated three different but interrelated coding frames based on our archival sources and interviews with NVivo (see Schreier, 2012). All three frames, of which we limited the number of categories and subcategories to around 40 as per recommended (p. 79), fulfilled the requirements of unidimensionality, mutually exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and saturation (pp. 71–77). Following this, we merged these frames to create a larger frame that included clear and detailed explanations regarding the label, definition, indicators, and examples of each category and subcategory. In the final step, we scrutinized each category and subcategory to identify and analyze power-loaded arguments, descriptions, narratives, metaphors, and expressions for a critical interpretation. Though our analysis emphasizes continuities, it also includes reflections on the neoliberal repositioning of the project, which already started in the 1980s and deepened since the early 2000s under the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule. Therefore it is important to note that we do not claim that the term "Turkish state" refers to a static entity that has remained unchanged since the early days of GAP. We indeed acknowledge the transformation of the political economy of Turkey since the initiation of GAP. In our analysis, we also take into consideration the different waves of liberalization the planning, construction, and operation of dams have passed through since the early 1980s. Nevertheless, we contend that the state continued to be a major coordinating and controlling actor in the process of constructing large dams until the mid-2000s, and its role in this regard has not vanished until today (see Akbulut, Adaman, & Arsel, 2018). For this reason, while we focus mostly on the development discourses of the state from the early 2000s onwards, which coincides the rule of the AKP, we see a certain degree of continuity in these discourses, such as that between the neoliberal legacy of Turgut Özal and his Motherland Party and the (authoritarian) neoliberal agenda of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP, rather than a rupture.

4. The construction of a region through design-power

Though the construction of ingenious water-systems could already be found in ancient Mesopotamia, the first modern water development studies on the region could be traced back to the early 20th century, more than a decade before the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. For example, Sir William Willcocks was engaged with the Young Turk Government as an advisor to the Turkish Department of Public Works and tasked to "survey and level the rivers and canals of the Tigris-Euphrates delta, and devise projects for the rehabilitation of the country" (Willcocks, 1910, p. 1). Still, the idea of constructing a dam and an HPP on the upper Euphrates dates back to the 1930s, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced the plan based upon his fascination with the Soviet Union's plans for the Dnieper (Turgut, 2000, p. 47). Water resource investigations in the region began with the establishment of hydrometric stations on the Euphrates and Tigris in 1936 and 1947, respectively. Topographical and hydrological maps of the region were made in this period. Reconnaissance studies were completed in 1958, and studies to assess the energy potential of the region were completed in 1963 (Lorenz & Erickson, 1999). The construction of the Keban Dam, the first major dam in the area, began in 1965 and finished in 1975. Eventually, all of the projects for both rivers were merged together and renamed GAP in 1977 (Bilgen, 2018b). In the 1980s, GAP was expanded to include additional development sectors and, thus, transformed into a multisectoral and integrated regional development project. The entrance of "sustainable development" and "human development" into the agenda of policymakers led to additional changes towards the redesigning of GAP as a "sustainable human development project" in the 1990s. As discussed in more detail later on, the project has been predominantly perceived and implemented as a private sector-friendly project from the early 2000s onwards (Bilgen, 2018b, p. 151). Despite the evolution of GAP in the past 40 years, the (ongoing) project is still expected to remove regional disparities, integrate centrifugal (Kurdish) groups, modernize land ownership, and develop energy, agriculture, and industry sectors (Warner, 2008, p. 279).

State authorities viewed the GAP region as a "different" and/or "problematic" region. This was due mainly to its composition of the population, which was predominantly Kurdish in a state that became increasingly constructed on the notion of Turkishness. The state was convinced that the behavior of its people had to be calibrated with the "materialistic values of the modern world" (Okyar, 1984, p. 50). It invoked the spirit of the 1920s, when the republican architect Abdullah Ziya had argued that architects had the responsibility to design villages that would guide and direct their inhabitants to become Turks (Ziya, 1933). However, socio-cultural differences and the lack of control over the population, both of which considered fruits of underdevelopment, were viewed as the most important barriers against the integration of the region and its population into the Turkish nation. In a parliamentary speech given in the early 1990s, the problems of the region were described as "a matter of poverty" and as "a problem of social order" (TBMM, 1992, p. 289). The region was "a land of jobless and hopeless people" and constituted "an order which [was] largely dominated by the understanding of feudalism, an order of lordship, and feudal structures" (p. 289). In relation to this, authorities also labeled the "language, culture, ethnicity, and lifestyle of the region" as "very different".[2] The notion of difference become the equivalent of the notion of "backwardness", a characteristic that the nationalist elites attached to the Kurds. People have been found "different-cum-backward" due especially to their lack of "proper" communications skills (in Turkish).[3] Sociological studies further highlighted that the region "has been devoid of security conditions for a long time" and "people's every kind of security is under threat in a crucial part of the region" (TMMOB, 1993, p. 14), portraying the region as a highly unstable and dangerous geography.

By depicting the region and people as such, state authorities (re-) produce a lack to be filled, a problem to be fixed, or an obstacle to be removed in the quest for modernization. Authorities also (re-)produce the dichotomies such as the ones between the self and other, natural and problematic, normal and deviant, sufficient and insufficient, or modern and backward, within which the former represented the ideal modernization vision of the state and the latter represented the

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[2] Interview, 30 April 2014.
[3] Interview, 21 March 2014.

imagined conditions of the GAP region. By employing "the language of crisis and disintegration", they also (re-)produce "a logical need for external intervention and management" (Crush, 1995, p. 9). In other words, such representations and accompanying discourses reinforce and legitimize the hierarchical, top-down, and one-sided nature of the modernization paradigm, especially by allowing authorities to claim themselves to be the sole decision-makers regarding how (infantilized) others should live their lives or how nature should be shaped.

The examination of these representations and discourses in light of monocultures provides additional insights. As mentioned before, the monoculture of knowledge acknowledges scientific knowledge as the only acceptable form of knowledge. In this context, the rendering of local social practices untrustworthy and invisible corresponds to the death of alternative knowledge or "epistemicide" (Santos, 2014). In their study of the Bohol Province of Mindanao Island in the Philippines, Gibson-Graham (2005) highlight how top-down schemes start with a compilation of data to generate a diagnosis and identify a problem, and they then establish a list of development objectives which amount to finance, infrastructure, and local leadership. However, "[i]n an insidious way, this 'neutral' information gathering and mobilization exercise executed a subtle conversion of a rich and diverse presence of *barangay* (local municipalities) attributes into a monotonously stylized representation of lack, for which outside assistance was the only solution" (p. 10). In the GAP framework, too, traditional irrigation methods, production techniques, and societal relations are devalued while their modern interpretations and applications are glorified. Specifically, local farmers and villagers are widely blamed for their so-called incompetency and incapability of following the "correct," scientific, and modern guidelines for agriculture. They were often held responsible for destructive ecological impacts of GAP such as waterlogging and soil salinization because it is believed that "they could not internalize technological irrigation. They thought that the more they irrigated the land, the more they would produce. Thus, they brought about salinization".[4] Accordingly, the assessment of local social practices that are based on indigenous knowledge as "obsolete" or simply "wrong" translates into the elimination of the reality on the ground in the GAP region. The same applies for the culture of the people in the region, or the "lack" of it, as illustrated in the GAP Social Action Plan:[5]

The population accumulating[6] in the cities does not share the traditional urban culture which has been developed over the centuries, but instead strives to establish its own identity as a different cultural entity. In these circumstances, the old city culture cannot maintain the cultural depth that used to possess. As a result, an awkward situation is coming into being where sections of society with very diverse socio-cultural structures share the social and physical spaces of the cities (GAP-RDA, 1999, p. 30).

The concealment of local social practices also relates to the practice of "rendering technical", the crucial element to translate the "will to improve" into concrete development projects (Li, 2007, p. 7). The domain to be intervened and governed has to be a legible/intelligible field. Development institutions (as well as states) employ their own

discourses that construct a certain target as a kind of object of knowledge and create a structure of knowledge around that object (Ferguson, 1994, p. xiv). In the past, for instance, development providers represented Lesotho as "a nation of farmers, not wage laborers; a country with a geography, but no history; with people, but no classes; values, but no structures; administrators, but no rulers; bureaucracy, but no politics" (p. 66). Thus, "[p]olitical and structural causes of poverty in Lesotho are systematically erased and replaced with technical ones, and the modern, capitalist, industrialized nature of the society is systematically understated or concealed" (p. 66). Thanks to this created structure of knowledge, development providers could come up with technical explanations to critical matters and to create a suitable object to intervene in a non-political manner (p. 87). The "technicization" of issues and the trivialization of "non-scientific" knowledge also reinforce the already existing gap between experts and laypersons (Bilgen, 2019). In the GAP region, laypersons have faced difficulties in raising their concerns and negotiating their demands. Major concerns of local farmers are related to the implementation of the projects, such as water access and distribution within irrigation projects (see Özerol, 2013). Yet other concerns were related to the lack of local processing infrastructures. The agricultural economy developed in the region was organized around the extraction of raw material, with the effect that much of the added value production took place in processing plants either in a few centers in the region or outside the region, in the western parts of the country. Moreover, as a result of the push for irrigated agriculture and agro-industrial development, regional potentials for developing dryland farming that would combine sustainable practices and local expertise were not considered. Participating in decision-making processes were precluded due to the complexity and "elitism" of scientific and expert knowledge (Bilgen, 2019). This is what Scott refers to as justifying "the authority of agricultural experts over mere practitioners" and excluding practitioners by using "unintelligible language" (Scott, 1998, pp. 48, 226). Some mayors in the region experienced alienation due to this exclusion of practitioners:

With all due respect, to honorable administrators here, I want to say something. They have prepared a truly perfect program. It is scientific, it is contemporary, but only 10–15 per cent of the audience can understand this language. We invited our mukhtars too, and 75–80 per cent of them did not understand even the word "sustainable development". If we are organizing this meeting for mukhtars and other representatives, we'd better make it more understandable (GAP-BKİ, 2000, p. 24).

Development "involves a promise of improvement, of some kind of progress towards better living conditions, higher incomes or longer lives" (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010). In that sense, development is expected to have a future orientation and bring about a positive change in people's lives irrespective of time and space. The portrayal of the GAP region as backward disqualifies the region and its history as worth knowing, and leaves no room to imagine alternative visions of the region. The monoculture of linear time gives primacy to concepts that embody a sense of forward direction such as progress, development, and modernization. According to the description in the GAP Social Action Plan, in the GAP region

[t]he traditional family, kinship, tribal and village structure, based on the Region-wide common patterns of kinship, restricts individual behavior and identifies individuals by the social groups they belong to, such as the family, tribe, etc. Genuine individualistic behavior and political participation is very limited. In the Region, the authority that determines how people act is the family, the tribe of the village chief or lord (GAP-RDA, 1999, pp. 4–5).

While in the past a wide array of questions such as what development means in the region's context (e.g., economic growth or social development), how it can be ensured (e.g., through industrialization or good governance), or how it should be measured (e.g., by national statistics or the Human Development Index) was discussed, little or no effort is paid to discuss and address other equally important questions.

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[4] Interview, 20 May 2014.

[5] This plan is based on the following social studies conducted between 1992 and 1994: the Management, Operation, and Maintenance Project Socioeconomic Studies; the Survey on the Trends of Social Change in the GAP Region; Population Movements in the GAP Region; the Survey on the Problems of Employment and Resettlement in Areas Affected by Dam Lakes in the GAP Region; and Women's Status in the GAP Region and Their Integration into the Process of Development.

[6] The "accumulation of population" refers to the arrival of rural populations displaced by the Turkish Armed Forces in its attempts to combat an armed insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), resulting in the destruction of some 3,000 rural settlements and displacement of an estimated 3–4 million Kurds. In the modernist narrative, this rural population spoiled the city culture and caused further social problems.

It is not adequately questioned what being underdeveloped meant for the region. The widespread, decades-long description of the region was hardly contested. On the basis of the portrayal of the area as *preceding* modernity, the relevant action identified is to design for better futures, for the production of a new geography, and for assimilating the region and its population into modern Turkey.

Since the first years of GAP, this new geography, together with its nature and people, was desired to be as standardized as possible to have a greater control over "the subjects". In actuality, "'[t]he people' are not an undifferentiated mass. Rich and poor, women and men, city dwellers and villagers, workers and dependents, old and young; all confront different problems and devise[d] different strategies for dealing with them" (Ferguson, 1994, pp. 280–281). In official GAP documents, however, the heterogeneity of the region was often ignored, and the local population was widely referred to as "them, locals, local people, people of the region, our people, our brothers there" without clear references given about their ethno-political identities. The monoculture of classification produces absences—that what is not worth to know or to preserve, only worth to be replaced. As a regional development project, GAP was perfectly suited for this mission as different identities, especially the Kurdish identity, are perceived as inferior, irrelevant, and non-existent—they were simply not constituting a credible alternative to the Turkish identity.

By characterizing the techno-scientific interpretation of development as the one and only right way to secure development, technocratic development discourses overshadow and discredit alternative or local development understandings and practices. Especially large-scale development projects "[turn] the focus from ideological struggle to technocracy" and distract attention "from social antagonism and [contribute] to mentally blocking the possibility of alternatives for entrepreneurialism" (Vento, 2017, p. 80). GAP is not an exception in this regard. The monoculture of the universal and the global creates absences in the particular and local reality. Because the development trajectory of the West is taken as a model to emulate in the GAP framework, Western concepts and practices are often borrowed with little or no modification to be applied in the course of the project. State authorities explain the adoption of these "imported" packages in light of elusive notions like "the conditions of the world today", "requirements of the changing world", "policy applications worldwide", or "modernization process" (Kut, 1999, p. 28). Thus, against the hegemonic universal or global reality, the particular and local features of the GAP region become undignified, noncredible, and invisible.

Finally, the monoculture of capitalist productivity and efficiency creates absences by acknowledging only economic growth and productivity measured in standard economic indicators as genuine economic activity while disregarding the rest. State authorities have aimed at transforming the GAP region by integrating it into national and international markets. Since the beginning of the neoliberal transformation of the Turkish political economy in the 1980s, the widespread argument being formulated was that "the full potential of GAP can only be realized through foreign and local investment" (Bağış, 1989). From a neoliberal perspective, a governance approach that involves the mobilization of crucial private actors through business elites or public-private partnerships is widely supported for allegedly being more technically efficient, flexible, collaborative, and participatory (Jessop, 1997, as cited in Vento, 2017, p. 70). In this light, a transformation of the region was imagined through creating "lucrative investment opportunities in agriculture and animal husbandry, in manufacturing industry, tourism and banking, alongside construction operations that will turn the region into a building site over the next 15 years" (Bağış, 1989, p. 222). It was also expected that after the implementation of GAP local people "who used to be highly dependent on natural conditions in dry agriculture and, thus [had] a fatalist and passive mentality, [would] reach consciousness regarding the human will and activity to be able to change the nature for their own interests, and create a more combatant and entrepreneur mentality" (GAP-BKİ, 1996, p. 6).

In the early 1990s, steps were taken to create economic development agencies to support industrialization based on private entrepreneurship, improve the region's business and investment environment, and increase the technology, efficiency, and competitiveness level of regional industries (pp. 13–35). Later in the 1990s, GAP Entrepreneur Support Centers (GAP-GİDEM) were established to provide consultancy services to foreign and domestic entrepreneurs and investors. From the 2000s onwards, especially after Turkey assumed the European Union candidate status in 1999 and the rise of AKP to power in 2002, the idea of using local potential as the engine of development and making the region more competitive gained greater currency. State officials stated that "Countries that fail to compete [and] mobilize the country's full potential at a maximum level will decline and drift away from competition. Hence, all the development potentials of the entire country should be mobilized" (TBMM, 2004, pp. 171–172).

Because people in the region were found to be "extremely prudent", "reluctant and scared of cooperation", "narrow-minded and short-sighted", and "inexperienced" in the 1990s (GAP-BKİ, 1996), new plans were made to transform the region into "a new, value-added economy" based on the identity of "the cradle of sustainable civilization" and to make people more competitive, risk-taking, entrepreneurial, and self-sufficient in the 2000s (GAP-GİDEM, 2007, p. 12). In the neoliberal narrative, the absence or lack of entrepreneurial skills would be addressed through "developing a culture and environment conducive to entrepreneurship" (GAP-BKİ 2014a, p. 37); an investment "into the future of all of us [and] help Turkey in the 21st century to enhance her worldwide competitive position competitive potential of the region" (GAP-BKİ 2014b, p. 43). In the late 2000s and 2010s, large corporations such as McDonald's, PepsiCo, Philips, and Unilever also increased their engagement in various projects to ensure corporate social responsibility as well (GAP-BKİ, 2017, p. 95). In this period, the GAP Action Plan (2008–2012) and the GAP Action Plan (2014–2018) were designed upon concepts such as competitiveness, growth based on local dynamics and endogenous potential, and institutional capacity. In both documents, economic development meant to create job opportunities, diversify production, increase access and integration to international markets, create city-based "centers of attraction", promote tourism (GAP-BKİ, 2008, p. 21), and increasing the livability of cities (GAP-BKİ, 2014a, p. 36). This focus on competitiveness, production for international markets, and livability of cities reflects the neoliberal turn under AKP, which had a negative effect on farming and triggered rural-to-urban flight (Öztürk, Gür, & Jongerden, 2020).

5. Discussion and conclusion

GAP was launched as a massive infrastructure project, and further expanded into a comprehensive development project over the decades that followed its inception in the 1970s. The project represents an aggressive modernization vision deployed in southeastern Turkey—a region that has undermined the Turkish state's "unity" for being populated primarily by the Kurds; the state's "modernity" for being economically disarticulated; and the state's "Westernness" for being "traditional" compared to the rest of the country (Harris, 2008, p. 1706). The discursive analysis of the narrative of official documents illustrates that GAP creates domination over the region through design as a particular form of power-knowledge. In the same way that Mbembe (2001) argues that Africa is presented in the Western imagination as an absent object, the power of the Turkish state in and/or over the region is constructed around the notion of "backwardness" or "underdevelopment". This produces a strategy that takes place through a process of generating "absences" or "non-existence" (Santos, 2004, 2006, 2014), which ends producing the *development́s object* as a "monotonously stylized representation of lack, for which outside assistance" is needed (Gibson-Graham, 2005, p. 10). In this way, the practices of the state are justified politically through the narrative of

mega-projects for economic development. Established and justified as a bureaucracy to foster development, GAP enables the state to extend its reach and inscribe its presence in the region.

The project works as a design-project, as far as it reveals how a long period of implementation is supposed to establish forms of working and living in the region which are conceived as modern, and which would be the foundation on which to assimilate Kurds into Turks. We argue that design is based not on knowledge of the region, but on the depiction of the region region to which these designs are brought, from dams to social development projects, in terms of what it lacked: work, order, understanding, and a future. Accordingly, the region could be transformed from its condition of being a "pre" (e.g., pre-modern or pre-developed) through new infrastructures and technologies like the building of new material and social environments. So could its people; they would become modern citizens who think and behave like Turks. We refer to this focus on design for the creation of development as design-power. This design-power is not only based on power-knowledge, but also created through the production of what is not allowed to exist. While the power-knowledge concept highlights the intimate relation between power and knowledge, drawing attention to the productive character of power, that what it produces, the notion of absence makes hearable what is being silenced. Introducing the concept of design-power, defined by power-knowledge and absence, we have tried to make understandable how the region has been designed as a project region—the GAP region—on the basis of erasure. Beneath the design-power is a geography of production, materialized in dams and canals, and one of erasure, flooded under dams, silenced by expert-language, and buried under projects.

The analysis allows us to argue that, as identified by the monoculture of knowledge, scientific knowledge and Western aesthetics are the only acceptable form of knowledge and aesthetic quality. As far as the historical agricultural practices, local economies, and cultural traditions of the GAP habitants do not fall into the Turkish canon, they are not only considered inadequate, but also, even more radically, not even recognized as existing. Within this logic, the shortcomings of new techniques or policies introduced in the region by GAP are by default presented as the result of the lack of understanding, skills, and capabilities of the local population. The narratives of GAP also exemplify the monoculture of linear time, which rests on the idea that history has a linear direction and that developed countries or state projects, such as the modernization of the Turkish nation, with its knowledge, institutions, economic model, and sociability forms are ahead of "underdeveloped areas". In this formulation, whatever represents the opposite of this "forward" as envisioned by the modern Turkish state is declared backward, traditional, simple, obsolete and/or underdeveloped. Furthermore, the Kurdish region appears in the form of an inferiority and subordination that cannot be overcome from within. Thus, the relationship of domination of Turkey over the GAP region is presented and understood as the consequence, and not the cause, of the hierarchy. The monoculture of classification here relates to the standardization of differences because it is based on attributes that deny the intentionality of the social hierarchy. Also, the monoculture of the universal and the global relates to the logic of dominant scale. In this context, the non-existence of the region is produced by the rendering of the local and particular as an inferior or noncredible alternative to what exists, in this case, the Turkish state. Finally, with respect to the monoculture of capitalist productivity and efficiency, which is based on the logic of market productivity, the economic growth of the region becomes an unquestionable rational objective to pursue and value. Thus, under the criteria of productivity, in the GAP region land and people could be defined as sterile and underqualified, respectively.

In the terrain of absence(s), design has become the way to exercise power together with the observation of geography and population, the absences created by the development discourse is a key feature of design-power. In this sense, GAP is design-power to produce a new region and new subjectivities, and works as a particular form of power-

knowledge. It has played a significant role in (re-)shaping the relations between the state and society as well as the relations within different societal groups in the region. We contend that the examination of similarly contested development projects across the world in light of this theoretical lens would help us unearth and better explain the workings of power of/in/around development and open up new perspectives in this research area.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zeynep S. Akıncı: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Arda Bilgen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Antònia Casellas:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Joost Jongerden:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Investigation, Writing - review & editing.

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