

Seeing the Trees, yet Not Losing Sight of the Forest: the Gezi Event¹ and Politics of Contestation in Turkey

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“Revolution was, once upon a time, a probability and a very beautiful one.” Murat Uyurkulak starts his novel *ToI* with this striking sentence, which tells the story of a long train journey made by two “defeated and exhausted” characters, once victims of the sweeping rage of the State and the brutal side of Turkey’s recent history. In the summer of 2013, the Gezi Park event in Turkey filled the hearts of those who took part with the beauty of this probability. Without any doubt, what had initially started as an objection against the demolition of the last remaining green space in the centre of Istanbul and turned into a fully-fledged upheaval against the authoritarian acts of the political establishment and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan’s conservative AKP government, was not a strive for revolution in the Marxist sense of the word. Nevertheless, the nationwide uprising that transformed a park into the headquarters and symbol of a massive nationwide revolt clearly entailed the “*ruthless criticism of the existing order*” and the message that the demonstrators were “down with somethings”² (*Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 1844).

Initially, the protests began on 28 May 2013 against the demolition of some 600 trees in Gezi Park for the reconstruction of the former Taksim Military Barracks (demolished in 1940) and a

shopping mall within the park. The platform, Taksim Solidarity, declared the demolition as illegal, protesting the decision by pitching tents in the park. The uprising then spilled over to other cities and parts of Turkey and gained tremendous support from people of various political ideologies and all walks of life. The police intervened with a heavy hand and anti-riot equipment. In Istanbul, after two days of intense clashes, the police retreated from the central areas, after which the protestors once again seized the park and the adjacent Taksim area. The park and square have been cleaned, and numerous kitchens, a small library and an infirmary have been built. As Mirko van Pampus, an editor from *Research Turkey*, argues, “the whole area is a constant stage for tens of thousands of people, either led by conviction or curiosity, and they are singing, dancing, shouting slogans, or bursting into spontaneous applause at random moments and places. It seems that an historical moment is indeed in the making” (Mirko van Pampus, 2013: 22). Gezi Park was turned into a commune, the so-called “Taksim Commune” until 16 June, when police attacked the park and evacuated it using tear gas and water cannons. The Gezi uprisings lasted until mid-July 2013, leading to eight casualties as a result of police brutality and leaving around 8,000 injured. More demonstrations were sparked very recently by the death of 15-year-old Berkin Elvan, who spent 269 days in a coma after being hit by a tear gas canister last June.

But, what was it in Gezi Park that turned a bunch-of-trees issue into a nationwide uprising?

¹ Although the concepts ‘resistance’ and ‘uprising’ better reflect the spirit of what happened in June 2013, I prefer to use the term ‘event’ in order to denote the significance and continuous nature of the process.

² One of the famous slogans of the Gezi event. One of the most significant characteristics of the Gezi revolt was the humorous and sarcastic, yet controversial and utterly political, slogans chanted in squares and written on walls protesting government and police brutality such as, “Enough! I’m calling the police,” “We take that gas in a single hit, bro,” “Pepper gas makes the skin healthy” and “You banned alcohol, people sobered up.”

Learning from the Squares: Tahrir, Zucotti, Puerta del Sol, Syntagma and...Taksim?

First of all, the Gezi events need to be considered in line with recent struggles in other parts of the world, which have aired grievances vis-à-vis the global financial crisis. As *ROAR Magazine* tells us, “Gezi was the indomitable genie of revolution that previously spooked ruling elites from Tahrir to Zucotti; the genie world leaders have been so desperately trying to stuff back into its suffocating neoliberal bottle ever since” (ROAR Collective, 2014). Indeed, the anti-globalisation spirit of the 1990s and early 2000s haunting Seattle, Genoa, Davos, Cologne and Montreal had a new target from around 2008 onwards: the financial crisis and the political leaders seen as the culprits of this economic and representational bottleneck. Activists of all ages and backgrounds have staged extensive demonstrations in the squares of various European cities, unhappy with the economic crisis, which has dashed people’s hopes for the future, especially among youth. Similarly, the Arab Spring, i.e. the wave of protests in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, also involved a straightforward civil resistance against the repressive actions of local governments, human rights violations and income gaps between various classes. For almost two decades, it has been the spectre of dissidence sweeping across various squares of the world, although the ‘demons’ have been different: corrupt politicians, political figures endangering middle-class lifestyles, global economic powers or urban regeneration projects.

However, “the Gezi movement is both all of these [previous] movements and none of them” (Göle, 2013: 8). Unlike the recent demonstrations in European countries, the uprising in Turkey was not sparked by extreme austerity measures. As Xypolia reminds us, “while in all these cases from the Mediterranean cities to the Western core of the Occupy movement, the young educated middle-class were protesting against their economic suffering, in Turkey the economic growth of the past decade has produced considerable benefits for the population. In particular, the emerging new middle-class in Tur-

key has seen its living standards rapidly increase during the AKP’s time in office” (Xypolia, 2013: 33). In this respect, therefore, any comparison between the protests in Turkey and the recent turmoil in the Mediterranean and the West lacks a basic understanding of the people’s demands in terms of their lifestyles. Neither is it comparable to the popular revolts of the Arab Spring in terms of the political structures of the respective geographies. Whereas the wave of protests in the Arab Spring put an end to decades-old dictatorships resulting in electoral systems being put in place, the protests in Turkey have rather been the criticism of the tyranny of the majority within the existing regime and the appreciation of individual and minority rights and freedoms.

The Social Fabric of Gezi

Another important debate on the Gezi event has been about the class background of the protestors. As previously mentioned, the demonstrators in almost all cities had different socio-economic backgrounds and political ideologies. Turkish flags, banners with pictures of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, circle-A icons symbolising anarchy and football shirts of various clubs were all among the symbols visible at Taksim or Kızılay³. This debate usually revolved around the argument that most protestors were well-educated ‘white Turks’ from middle class backgrounds, at odds with the government’s increasing interference with their lifestyles. This is partially true: the initial organising principle of the Gezi uprising did not entail working class militancy, directed against capitalism or unequal income distribution. All in all, protestors were, more often than not, people who were not struggling for their daily bread. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the movement appealed to a heterogeneous and hybrid group of people, including the working class, protesting against the repercussions of predatory capitalism, be it in the form of neo-liberal urban regeneration projects or workplace exploitation. On the night of 31 May 2013, the tens of thousands of marchers occupying and crossing the Bosphorus Bridge included many people from working class neighbourhoods. It was the protest of all people and all continents.

³ The central square in Ankara, which was flooded by hundreds of thousands of people during the Gezi period.

One thing is for sure: although the Gezi protests brought together hundreds of thousands of people of all backgrounds and ages, the activists were predominantly young and had an urban background. This rendered the Gezi event similar to the student movement of 1968 in Europe, where, particularly in France, the conservative, democratically elected leader in power had lost touch with urban youth. But, this time the younger generation did not turn against the older generation. On the contrary, parents were joining their children and participating in the same protest movement. "In Paris, the '68 slogan "ça suffit" ("enough is enough") was aimed against Charles De Gaulle for holding power in office for ten years. Similar to the French context, the Gezi protests said "enough" to the last ten years of power held by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan" (Göle, 2013: 8).

Not surprisingly, due to the young age of most of the protestors, the protests led to record-breaking tweeting and online sharing in Turkey. A final quotation from one of the protestors may help to explain why these 'youngsters' were on the streets:

"We don't have a name yet. Some call us the 88 generation; some call us the ones that were born in the 1990s. We were repeatedly told that we were *apolitical*, as a consequence of the suppressive politics of the 1980 military coup. We were taught that we couldn't change anything. We kept quiet until PM Erdogan, who was blinded by his power, started to make decisions on behalf of *us*. Now he calls us "marginal groups" because we let the world know that "he gives democracy a bad name". [...] It just didn't work. The AKP's religion and ethnicity-based politics have kept us away from each other. Some of us call ourselves Mustafa Kemal's soldiers. Some refuse to be a soldier for any reason. We were upset with the government for dissimilar reasons. That's why we wrote "down with somethings" on the heart of Taksim Square" (Doğan, 2013: 69).

Conclusion

The Gezi event has probably been Turkey's most significant news story of 2013. Millions occupied the streets and squares, angered by the violent reaction of the government and police to a peaceful pro-

test. As the demonstrators frequently argued, the Gezi event's strength lied not in adherence to flags and symbols, but in the fact that it created politically mobile protestors out of people whose most political action hitherto had been to vote at elections or share their favourite columnist's article on Facebook. It is still too early to carry out a fully-fledged academic analysis on the process but right now it seems that nothing will ever be the same for the Turkish people, who are still mourning the death of eight civilians and genuinely hoping that Gezi will lead to freedom and justice. Let us hope that the Gezi experience has not only been a beautiful probability, but also the trigger of a better future for Turkish democracy.

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