

1.6 GEZI RESISTANCE AND FORUMS¹

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“Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere resistance” is one of the most famous slogans of the popular uprising that emerged out of the Taksim Gezi park protests in Istanbul in May and June 2013. Ironically, the 15th of June police crackdown that violently pushed the protesters out of Gezi Park has given occasion to organize more elaborate “forums” and “people’s assemblies” in different public parks of Istanbul and other, predominantly western cities of Turkey.

Today many of these parks offer the much-needed space to speak, discuss, criticize, and organize cultural events (such as film screenings and photography exhibitions) around social issues to build a common political vocabulary and a sense of solidarity for thousands of protesters from all walks of life. However, the questions that often confront uprisings of such massive scale—where millions have taken to the streets for systemic changes, not for a cosmetic makeover—remain to be engaged. They are questions of political strategy and organization, such as how to sustain and expand the popular force of the uprising and transform it into a movement that will produce lasting revolutionary effects, and what is the role of the forums in this regard. Today, these questions are of particular relevance, as the Gezi Resistance currently continues largely in the shape of forums and yet draws much less attention from the domestic or international media: No spectacular police brutality, no media coverage.

Henri Lefebvre, in his brilliant analysis on Paris '68 in *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval*, observed that the protests prompted an ecstatic proliferation of words: words that had never been spoken before. It was a moment of joyful creativity, of thinking the unthinkable. It was an eruption, which no one really expected or knew how to handle (which is not to say that the

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protests had not been the culmination of concrete historical struggles). Yet the protests were also marked by the problem of lack of communication between different neighborhoods of the city, especially between its core and peripheries. Certainly, Gezi Resistance is not Paris '68, but likewise, it is an eruption of the unforeseen and has been facing a similar problem of communication. In fact, forums were formed exactly to tackle this problem. Even if each forum gradually has developed its own agenda and rhythm, forums also share a number of topics of discussion and come up with a similar organizational framework. If the uprising has been inspired by, among others, the recent student or youth movements of Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Egypt, and to some extent the US, it is no coincidence that horizontalist organization and direct democracy ideas have also enjoyed much currency in the forums.

After the police occupation of Gezi Park to restore “public order,” decentralization of the protests in the form of forums seemed inevitable. But even when the protesters occupied Gezi Park for fifteen days in early June, there were attempts at self-management through forming collectives and volunteer groups. Among other groups, “*Müşterekler*” (Commons) played a notable role in organizing a free medical center, food center, and library, as well as workshops and activities that aimed to produce a database of oral testimonies and visual records of the protests and police violence.

Different groups set up tents that specialized in specific activities. For instance, film industry workers collected footage of protests and held meetings with well known actors for publicity; “socialist feminists” erased sexist slogans from walls; those associated with the Kurdish movement held discussions about the future of the “peace process” with the Turkish government; and some others held discussions that focused on the social costs of urban redevelopment plans driven by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) government, as well as the commodification of the environment, the financialization of the economy, precarious labor, and enclosures.

Thousands of people—anarchists, socialists, communists, trade unionists, feminists, members of the LGBT community, “anti-capitalist Muslims,” Kurdish

movement representatives, soccer fans, and nationalist-secularists—stood up together almost miraculously against the increasingly authoritarian, populist, conservative neoliberalism represented by the AKP. And for a moment, the divisions and conflicts seemed to be transcended in Gezi Park against the common enemy. However, this does not mean that they had been erased or condoned peacefully. Indeed, the government has been doing its best to exploit the divisions along the familiar line of “Turkish vs. Kurdish” and “Muslim vs. secular.” In order to isolate the protesters, the government called them “vandals” (*çapulcu*), “marginals,” or agents of an international conspiracy. Many liberal or neoliberal analysts and armchair sociologists highlighted the “middle class character” of the protests to say that they lacked and will never have any popular appeal or potential or that they are friendly products of the so-called economic boom—as if the protests were simply about some cosmopolitan demands of the “rich,” i.e. white-collar workers, who had no worries about their precarious life “indebted” to the speculative credit economy and foreign capital-driven financialization promoted by the neoliberal policies of the AKP. This middle class characterization conveniently neglected the fact that the protests have drawn many people from different low-income neighborhoods (such as Tarlabaşı and Gazi), from the peripheries that have been politically very engaged over many years.

It is against this background that the forums are organized. While it is not possible to know precisely the number of forums or the content of all discussions, one may estimate that there are about seventy forums across different cities of Turkey—with more than thirty happening in Istanbul alone. The fact that no single individual, organization, or institution (including the state) can say what is happening has been the strength of the protests. This explains the hundreds of arbitrary, and targeted, arrests and detentions made by the police during the heat of the protests and their aftermath until today. Organized in public parks, most forums were initially preoccupied with police violence. They provided a platform for people to share their personal experiences of violence and incidents of police attack; organize marches to demonstrate against illegal

detentions and unaccountable police murders; suggest self-defense strategies against possible attacks; and inform about what has been happening in other forums or urban fronts of the struggle.

At least, this is what I observed in some of the Istanbul forums I attended, two of the most popular forums being organized in Abbasağa Park (Beşiktaş) and Yoğurtçu Park (Kadıköy). Here, people formed a huge circle, in the center of which those who wanted to speak lined up for two- to five-minute talking slots. The forum participants listened and gave feedback (their approval, reservations, etc.) through a sign language that is familiar to anyone who saw the Occupy Wall Street assemblies in New York City. In some forums, more specialized speakers (lawyers, doctors, journalists) were invited to give presentations focusing on different situations, such as what to do when arrested or detained by the police, especially in cases of sexual harassment, or how to form alternative media that could work outside the hegemonic capital-state alliance—which, as we have seen, caused the unbreakable silence of the Turkish media about the protests.

During Ramadan, “anti-capitalist Muslims” organized “Iftar of the Earth” (a fast-breaking dinner) in different forums, which strongly contrasted with the extravagant dinners sponsored by the government. The “Iftar” organized in Taksim on July 28th, which brought together anti-capitalist Muslims and leftist groups (especially Halkların Demokratik Kongresi [People’s Democratic Congress]), was attacked by the police with tear gas and water cannons, as Gezi Park was once again closed to the public. Increasingly, the forums also have engaged with questions such as how to develop counter-strategies against the government’s systemic and ruthless denunciation of the protesters, and how to spread the word of resistance to more conservative neighborhoods that did not support the uprising, and which were provoked by the government to oppose the protests. Is it a good idea to invite the AKP’s grassroots or other religious-conservative groups to the forums? If so, how to do it? And how to “form a dialogue” with those people if they ever show up?

These questions have demanded a certain urgency, as a few Istanbul forums had already been attacked by “civilians” (it is still not clear if they were undercover police officers) with long knives and machetes. However, there are also other urgent questions concerning the divisions among the protesters, such as how to prevent the seizing of the protests by rightwing secularist-nationalists, or their political utilization by the already-existing nationalist People’s Republican Party (CHP), the main opposition party in the parliament. What are the chances of forming a genuine collective will, which could operate beyond the political field dominated by the existing political parties, and would aim to transform the existing political-economic system? How to think of the political movement or the space of political action beyond the urgencies dictated by “electoral democracy,” without becoming a system-friendly “civil society” organization?

Currently, there is no major political party that corresponds to the eruption caused by the uprising. Almost all political parties deeply absorbed by the rules of parliamentary democracy have lagged behind the courage and creativity of the popular protests, in which millions took the streets. The AKP has been constantly claiming to represent the people by invoking its recent electoral successes—in an election system where the threshold to enter the parliament is ten percent of the national vote, eliminating the chances for minority parties—as if democracy ends with the ballot box. With local elections looming in March 2014, the pressure to reduce political action to electoral campaigning—and arresting it within the existing system—will continue to be felt. This has also started to instigate alienating competition and conflict between the CHP and the leftist groups, which have constituted the main thrust of the protests (coloring its anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian vision) in spite of their small numbers.

Yet my recent experience in Istanbul forums, including the recently emerged Gezi Park forum, suggests that many protesters are well aware of these problems. Devising local committees and working groups, they have been searching for ways to develop a new political language and engage creatively in social problems, especially those of the urban poor under the threat of eviction

by redevelopment projects. Focusing on concrete problems in particular neighborhoods seems to help bypass a top-down understanding of politics, as it enables activist groups to identify and organize around issues that have popular and systemic relevance. This then would be combined with constructive engagement with issues of particular historical importance at this juncture, such as, the “peace process” between the Kurdish movement and Turkish government (including the Roboski massacre and the war in Rojava) and perhaps more important, the socialization of peace beyond the “negotiations” that take place behind the doors. To this end, new formations like Halkların Demokratik Kongresi (People’s Democratic Congress), which brings together Kurdish and Turkish leftist groups, are very promising. They undertake political work in a number of forums and popular assemblies around Turkey to constitute and coordinate local centers of organized counter-power.

The aim is more than “winning an election” in the next two years under the sign of one existing party or another. It is no less than planting the seeds of a future people’s democracy, which will require a thorough transformation of existing class relations of power and hierarchies constituted by a patriarchal homophobic neoliberal capitalism. “This is just a beginning, we keep struggling,” as the powerful slogan of the Gezi Resistance says.