

1.4 GEZI PARK AS A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER FOR THE RECENT LOCAL STRUGGLES IN TURKEY

Evin Deniz¹

'Don't get scared man; it is we, the people!'

A slogan from The Gezi Uprisings

During the Gezi Uprisings, according to the report of the Ministry of Interior, occurring in 80 cities and out of 81,3 million, 545 thousands of people participated actively in 4.725 manifestations reclaiming their political role in reshaping their own cities, defending their liberties and above all exclaiming their quest for democracy. 5.341 people were detained and 4.312 people and 694 police officers were injured². 6 young persons died and 12 more lost one of their eyes due to disproportionate intervention of the police forces. 150.000 shells of tear gas were used. Since police officers directly targeted protesters while they were throwing these shells, 100 people suffered from head trauma.³ These street protests and the response of the government were unprecedented, even in a country like Turkey that experienced three brutal coup d'état within its 90 years of history.

It was not only a reaction to the Taksim Pedestrianisation Project that includes cutting down the trees of the Gezi Park (in Taksim, the city center of Istanbul) and constructing a shopping mall in the shape of the old Ottoman Military Barracks (Topçu Kışlası, in Turkish) that was demolished in 1940. It was much more than that. But at this point, it would be significant to mention why Prime Minister Erdoğan was insisting in reconstructing that old military barracks; it was the one where soldiers raised up against their superiors demanding to govern the country according to the Shari'a, Muslim canonical laws, on April, 13th of

¹ Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Madrid. Her research interests are urban social movements and the political economy of space. E-mail: evin.deniz@gmail.com

² News on the report of the Ministry of Interior;

<http://www.etha.com.tr/Haber/2013/09/20/guncel/icisleri-bakanliginin-gezi-raporu/>

³ Gezi Report of the Human Rights Association; <http://www.ihd.org.tr/index.php/raporlar-mainmenu-86/el-raporlar-mainmenu-90/2681-gezi-park-direnii-ve-sonrasnda-yaananlara-likin-deerlendirme-raporu.html>

1909.⁴ It is the best instance to notice to which point has reached the ambitions of the actual Prime Minister.

As it has been repeated consistently by both sides of the conflict, the government and the protesters, “it is not three-five trees; it is much more than that!” For the people, it was an accumulation of 11 years of the mandate of a neoliberal-authoritarian-Islamic government. For the government, especially for Erdoğan, it was a conspiracy aiming to take him down designed outside the country. What was it then? What made people lose their fear and stay in the streets during weeks despite cruel policing? It was the direct and harsh intervention of the government, especially of Erdoğan, in people’s everyday lives and in very personal decisions; prohibiting the sale of alcohol after 10 p.m.; deciding how many children should they have (for Erdoğan at least 3); which should be the way that women give birth (Erdoğan is against cesarean), and for him “Abortion is a murder!”, and many other interventions. Moreover, he claims that we should raise our children according to the religious principles and the government put his part and made a considerable change in the education system. It is as weird as it sounds but true that a prime minister plays the role of the “only man” and decides for all of us in any subject. City planning is his another favorite issue and this is the “architecture” of many “crazy projects” such as third bridge above the Bosphorus, which means losing the surviving forests at the north of the city, third airport in Istanbul, again at the north part, and many others.

Another discussion, which seems to be more theoretical, is how to name this event: *resistance*, as it is mostly called in Turkish, or *uprisings*, as it is named especially by foreign left-wing observers. What is in question is not only labeling but also giving it a role within the actual equilibriums and construction of a common democratic future. According to Savran (2013), labeling this event as “Gezi Resistance” is erroneous in three ways: first of all “resistance” is a position of defense for social movements, then uprisings were not special to

⁴ News on the history of the old Ottoman Military Barracks; <http://blog.milliyet.com.tr/gezi-parki-ve-topcu-kislasi-ardindaki-tarihi-gercekler/Blog/?BlogNo=417986>

İstanbul, it was a countrywide event. In Ankara, Hatay and Eskişehir, for example, demonstrations continued for weeks even after in Istanbul everyday life returned to its normality, since these three cities lost three young people during the uprisings. Finally using the term resistance has the danger of hiding the main causes of the event since, as it is already explained, it was not only a resistance against an urban project. Even if the term “resistance” is generally preferred for this event in Turkey, it is called as Gezi Uprisings in this piece since it is just the beginning of a long struggle that aims to construct a real democracy.

Unprecedented Gezi Uprisings with its antecedents

As already mentioned, this event is unprecedented but not without any antecedents. Gezi Uprisings were very important as a place of encounter for the recent local struggles in Turkey. It allowed participants to realize the wealth of experiences and the diversity of roles inherited from the last ten years of local struggles. To take some examples, there have been innumerable urban social movements against urban regeneration projects underway in all of Turkey’s big cities like the case of Dikmen Valley and Mamak districts in Ankara and Gülsuyu, Gülensu, Başibüyük and Tarlabaşı districts in İstanbul, and there is ubiquitous rural resistance against numerous hydroelectric power plants planned over almost all the rivers. Therefore, it is no accident that these events started with a pacifist resistance against converting one of the very few green areas (Gezi Park) in downtown İstanbul into a shopping mall. Turkish cities are in a massive regeneration process, putting the construction sector at the core of the economy and using all the pretexts such as earthquake risks and abundance of squatter houses. This is one of the main impulses that made people take the streets because they are also facing with similar problems in their own neighborhood or city.

Moreover, financialization through indebting the entire population with housing mortgages is one of the very recent strategies of accumulation for Turkish economy. Given the still burning experience of Spain, it is not difficult to predict

the future of this strategy of “economic development” in Turkey. Under the rule of the actual government, during last 11 years, the pace of this process has accelerated by empowering the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) directly dependent to the Prime Ministry, which means that it functions as a proper ministry. Lately, with some legal adjustments, TOKI became more powerful than any other ministry. For instance, it can legally change land use patterns by simply modifying the relevant plans and expropriating any property it deems necessary. Eraydin (2012) characterizes this tendency as the “*authoritarian populism of entrepreneur state*” and underlines the contradiction between the discourse on liberalizing markets and increasing state intervention as a new stage of neoliberalism. As Harvey (2007) stresses, “*accumulation by dispossession*” becomes the main mode of accumulation during the neoliberal epoch of the capitalist system. Moreover, the dispossession of urban populations (through foreclosures, evictions, privatization of public services etc.) is the ultimate method of this mode of accumulation. Merrifield (2002: 76) eloquently described this phenomenon: “*The link between economic growth and the urban process assumes an inextricable unity*”.

Capitalism’s core has been in crisis since 2008 due to above mentioned unsustainable model, with millions of foreclosures that affected mostly vulnerable populations worldwide. In the words of Harvey: “*The crisis now is as much an urban crisis as it ever was*” (2012: 53). In this context some urban movements have flourished as the offspring of recent mass movements such as the Arab Spring, 15M, Occupy Movement and Gezi Uprisings. These antecedent movements have been mainly urban-based. Examples included the PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca/Platform for those Affected by Mortgages) in Spain, Take Back the Land and Picture the Homeless in the US, The City is For All in Hungary and Taksim Solidarity in Turkey, among others. These examples show how this kind of struggles can serve as a starting point for the politicization of the people. Aforementioned local movements have been the processes that led to the politicization of a considerable part of the society and made them participate in the Gezi Uprisings in all over the country. As

Harvey (2012) indicates, this is the “revolutionary potential of urban movements”.

Not only the protesters but also the methods of resistance are inherited from these ancestor movements. As Erensü (2013) exemplifies: resistance tents, resistance turns, using the body as a shield in front of the bulldozer, destroying the caterpillars, using the social media to communicate and to organize, humorous opposition, reopening the private owned spaces which used to be public to the public use, and passive resistance against the police were all methods developed recently within those struggles.

What is also not new is the cruel policing against this kind of struggles in Turkey. A striking example is that of May 31st, 2011, in a demonstration organized against the rally of Prime Minister in Hopa (Artvin, a city at the east coast of the Black Sea) where a resistance was going on against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant. Police intervened brutally and one of the protesters died of heart attack triggered by tear gas. In accordance with Erensü (2003), the Gezi Uprisings have been inspired by these local movements, therefore it is crucial to be aware of this reality to be able to propose relevant politics for its future.

Encounters within a too polarized society

It is also worth mentioning that the most important achievement of these uprisings was to bring together all sectors of the society that have been polarized by the hegemony throughout the whole history of the country. However, in this case, as Kuymulu puts it very well; “*The uprisings that caught AKP government off-guard brought together an unlikely body of people from all walks of life for the first time in recent memory.*” (Kuymulu, 2013: 277). This was the most surprising point of the event even for the protestors, since “Turkish democracy” works on the principle of *otherization*. Turkey was founded as an “instrumental democracy”, otherwise it would not be possible to accomplish a radical modernity project, the Turkish Republic (Tekeli, 2013). According to Tekeli (2013), Turkey never had the ability to solve its problems in a democratic

way; rather it puts a part of the society as an enemy in front of the other part, the Kurdish question being the best example of this tradition. In this sense, Turkey has a lot in common with the protagonist countries of the Arab Spring; *Nair* (2013) expresses that the society, as it presents itself, is too polarized.

During the Gezi Uprisings, Erdoğan reproduced this polarization uttering that *"We cannot keep the other 50 per cent of the society at home!"*, (he was referring to the ones who voted for his party) and he also demanded from his 50 per cent to denounce their neighbors who support these protests just making noise with some pots each day at a certain moment. This was the extreme try-out of polarization of the Turkish society. Erdoğan's perception of democracy, as he clarified many times, is as simple as that: an elected government (especially the one with majority like his government) can do whatever it wants and the rest of the society that did not vote for this government has to endure until the next elections. Purcell (2013) perfectly defines this mentality as *"autocratic majoritarianism of Erdoğan"*. Therefore, more than anything, this is a very deep democracy problem that made masses mobilize in an unforeseen way. It was also a practice for the protestors living a democracy within the struggle by sharing the demands and acting with solidarity and respect towards the others who were shown as enemies until that time. As Lefebvre (2009:61) flawlessly asserts, "democracy is nothing other than the struggle for democracy", (quoted by Purcell, 2013).

Not only the demonstrations, but also the experience of the Gezi commune, just like the one practiced in Puerta del Sol in 2011, became a place of encounter in a Lefebvrian sense. For Lefebvre the urban is the place of encounter. Given the complexity of urban society and everyday life, the encounter is an inevitable and essential part of modern cities. For the first time in Turkish history, nationalists and Kurds, Kemalists and left-wing activists, LGBT members and traditional, religious people got together against undemocratic politics of the government and the violent police interventions. A woman who is an active member of a professional association confesses how during Gezi Commune she realized that before this experience, she was avoiding coming up with a gay or a lesbian

(personal interview). Left-wing activists were surprised by being at the same demonstration with right-wing people, and vice versa. Women for the first time in their lives stayed at the streets during whole night without preoccupying what time is it and how to return home (Orhon, 2013). Orhon (2013) continues thus: within a month, a lot of things, which could not be changed after twenty years, has changed in this country.

No surprise either that women constituted the majority of this colorful composition since they have been and still are the ones who suffer most from the interventions in private lives. For Özman (2013), it was not the uprisings of the youth as it is generally agreed upon, but it is the uprisings of the women, maybe a majority of them young women, that made the difference. Besides, women who were not at the streets were waiting at the entrance of their buildings to help the protestors, even if they were invisible. They were ready with their resistance kit: Talcid and vinegar against pepper gas, first-aid materials and some food/beverage. Another group of women, who were more visible, are the “Mothers of Gezi”. They were supporting their children instead of insisting to make them return home. Mothers of Gezi went to the Gezi Park to show their support to the struggle of their children and they formed a human chain. Despite all these, within the first group “representing the protestors” who had a meeting with the vice prime minister on June 5th, 2013, there wasn’t any woman. This is another proof of how difficult is to change the patriarchal mentality imposed on us (Özman, 2013).

Another very significant contribution of Gezi Uprisings to the Turkish society is revealing how state and mass media were manipulating the Kurdish question. After experiencing how brutal can be police forces against their people and seeing how media was ignoring and obscuring the facts, general deliverance of the society, especially of the protestors, was that “*We now understand what Kurdish people are living*”. A slogan puts very powerfully this recognition: “*Do you understand now why Kurdish people have been using double antennas?*” making reference to the second satellite antenna of the Kurdish houses to watch alternative Kurdish channels which are broadcasting from abroad. As

Karakoçan (2013, quoted by Önder, 2013) asserts, the Gezi Uprisings are the self-criticism of a society.

During the Gezi Uprisings, a new TV channel has founded by the protestors called “Çapul TV”, whose name refers to the word used by Erdoğan to describe the protestors (“çapulcular” means “marauders” or “vandals”). Twitter was the virtual hero of the uprisings since it helped protestors to organize themselves, to warn about the police’s actions, and to inform the rest of society about what was really going on. Çapul TV is still broadcasting as also do some local radio channels also founded within the neighborhoods to mobilize the neighborhood forums.

Contrary to what happened in Puerta del Sol, that *los indignados* themselves decided to leave the plaza in a peaceful way and went to the neighborhoods with the motto “*We are not going, we are expanding*”, in Taksim Square people received a violent police intervention, police burned the tents and destroyed the Gezi Park’s commune on June 15th, 2013. Then, Taksim Solidarity (umbrella organization that had mobilized long before the uprisings against the Taksim Pedestrianisation Project) decided to continue with neighborhood forums realized in a park of each neighborhood. Even if in Turkey there has been no neighborhood association tradition like the one in Spain, which was the locomotive of the Citizen Movement in Madrid and in many other cities during 60s and 70s, these forums worked fairly well. Until the cold weather took effect, many neighborhoods, especially the ones that have a mobilization tradition due to a previous experience or sectarian differences, lived quite active weeks. Nowadays, some of the forums are being held in cafes within the neighborhood, and some are waiting for the arrival of good weather.

What is also striking is how the protestors made use of the sense of humor during the uprisings despite the whole outrageous interventions of the police and arrogant speeches by Erdoğan. To mention some cases in point: as an answer to the brutal police interventions: “*Enough! I will call the police*”; about the restriction of the alcohol sales: “*You prohibited alcohol, the people sobered down!*”; finally, about heavily used pepper gas: “*Pepper gas beautifies the*

skin!". Humor became the best strategy of the protestors to renew their strength and hope.

Revenge of the government

It is also crucial to talk about the politics of revenge carried out by Erdoğan to notice the very early repercussions of the event in our daily lives. The legislation of the semi-autonomous professional organizations has been modified in order to subordinate them to ministries, since in Turkey professional organizations have always been political organizations (for the government they are "ideological") in contrast to their European counterparts, and also during the uprisings they mobilized all their resources. Another adjustment on the usage of internet came into force in January, 2014; it is a clear censorship and not also restricts the access to information but also the freedom of expression.

On the other hand, being aware that traditional polarization within the society started to melt down through these encounters, government and again the leading figure Erdoğan defined a new enemy, namely, women living beyond the norms of this conservative society. Erdoğan stated that it is impossible to accept for Turkish society that "girls and boys" are living in the same house without being married. He was consciously targeting the youth who was the protagonist of the recent uprisings. Just after this declaration, plenty of homes were visited by police officers, some meddle neighbors called the police to denounce their young neighbors or simply left a threatening note at the entrance of the building. Gender is again used as an instrument to interfere with people's lives and to divide the society.

What's more, indictments of the Gezi trial have been accepted and 36 protestors are accused (4 of them are still detained) of terrorism, creating chaos, damaging the public property, and putting the state and the police officers in a helpless situation in the eyes of the society. Demands go from 3 to

58 years of imprisonment for the accused protestors⁵. Moreover these indictments claim that police forces used a proportional force against the protestors.

Besides this battle started with the Gezi Uprisings, a new confrontation has been underway with the government and its old friend and also ex-partner Fetullah Gülen and his community. Gülen is a self-exiled religious leader living in the U.S.A., who supported the government in return for putting his people at the very key positions within the state, like the police and justice departments. Nowadays, his loyal people are revealing the corruptions of the government starting from the ministers - and their sons - and reaching to Erdoğan - and his son. Not surprisingly, these corruption cases are mostly related to the gigantic construction firms, which will also sound a lot to the Spaniards. Therefore, the revenge of the Gezi Uprisings has become the second priority for the government. However, with the coming of local elections on 30th of March 2014, these conflicts gained another pace. As it is obvious from the abovementioned realities and its sequence, Turkey is in a dynamic and transformative process, henceforth it is very difficult to put some distance and analyze these facts. What I have tried to do with this piece is just give a general overview and share the first attempts of analysis.

How to analyze this *moment/event* in order to create a democratic future?

First of all, it is worth to cite Alain Badiou's analysis of the Gezi Uprisings: he describes Gezi as a new political space that includes a collective mobilization, bring together different social groups, and it is the politicization of this space as well. He claims that the future of this event is closely related to the construction of a new political subject. Afterwards, this new political subject will create new ways of mobilizations. He goes on to say that after a political event, neither the world nor we can be the same. He summarizes the uprisings as the rise of an

⁵ News on Gezi Trial;

http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/gezi_iddianamesi_polis_eylemcilere_orantili_guc_kullandi-1169166

independent mobilization and an independent collectivity (*Journal Express*, 139; Nov-Dec. 2013).

Another approximation can be a Lefebvrian one: when we think about the time axis of this event, it can be argued that it is a moment. According to Lefebvre, a moment is “a time of dramatic change and disruption to the everyday routine” (Elden, 2011: 24). As it has been observed from all over the world, it was a clear disruption of the everyday life, not only for the protestors, but also for their worried parents at home, for the journalists, for the Turkish and Kurdish people living abroad and so forth. It was a moment of awakening, of changing together. For Nietzsche, from whom Lefebvre learned what a moment is, it is “the place where past and future collide in the present” (Elden, 2011: 25). This was exactly the case; while the polarized parts of the society were encountering and empathizing one another, their past and future collided at that precise moment. This moment demonstrated that the individual cannot be separated from the society (Elden, 2011).

Regarding the context, in the midst of a transition to a new historical period, as Laclau (2013) explains, it occurred as a result of the collapse of the proper mentality of the economy, which was claiming that it is a united area governed by its own logic, and we are witnessing mass movements triggered by fundamental transformations of our everyday lives. Agreed with Laclau on his description of the current situation, it would be convenient to start with a Laclauian analysis on how this event has spread nationwide as exposed by Özen and Avcı (2013). As it is generally concurred, this rapid expansion of the movement occurred as a reaction to the violent police interventions and Erdoğan’s arrogant discourses. However, the following analysis of the Gezi Uprisings not only reveals how this event came up but also explains the strategies of the government. Basic unit of political movement analysis, for Laclau, is the category of *social demand*. Any social/political movement comes about by voicing the unsatisfied social demands (by the responsible institutional structures) and mobilizing the relevant social groups. Expansion and power of such movements depend on their ability of expressing a variety of social

demands in a comprehensive way. More social demands it represents, more social groups it can mobilize. What makes these demands 'equivalent' is the reality of being unsatisfied. In order to unite different social demands within a long struggle, 'a collective identity' should be constructed. This identity construction can only be possible if one of the equivalent social demands gains a symbolic meaning and became a 'denotative' that represents the other demands and unite different social groups (Özen & Avcı, 2013).

According to these authors, in the case of the Gezi Uprisings, what makes all the social demands equivalent is the fact that they have been ignored by the government. This commonality enabled these demands to come together. This is why Gezi Park became the place of encounter for diverse social groups. Conservation of the Gezi Park became the *denotative* of the all demands and gained an important symbolic meaning as started to represent the other unsatisfied social demands. However, as Özen and Avcı (2013) stress, Gezi events have not constructed a collective identity yet. What the government strategically did is ignoring the other demands and only talking about Gezi Park. In advance they fulfilled this demand partially to prevent it being a denotative for the other social demands since if it is fulfilled it would not be an equivalent any more (Özen & Avcı, 2013). The government is also aware of the complexity of constructing a collective identity for different, formerly antagonist, social groups. This is why the government wiped up the Gezi Park commune. Ongoing neighborhood forums can be another opportunity to construct that necessary collective identity in due course.

The challenging question that remains, then, is how we reached such a point that most of the social demands can be ignored and a majority of the society can stay out of the decision-making processes. This is not a peculiarity of Turkey but is a global situation shaped according to the necessities of the neoliberal stage of the capitalist system. Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and many others called this process as 'post-democratic'. Even if the representative democracy of capitalism (mainly elections) seems to be working, politics is shaped behind this scene by elected governments and elites (Crouch, 2004;

quoted by Swyngedouw, 2011). This tendency has been clearly revealed through the crisis management of numerous governments since 2008, by economization of politics (Morgan, 2003). On the other hand, as post-democracy discussions argue, the economic is tried to be shown as depoliticized, pretending as if these two spheres were completely separated from each other. The ways in which this illusion is created can be summarized as “cultivation of a state of emergency by the elites”, “transnational organizations management” and “tyranny of participation” (quoted by Swyngedouw, 2011).

These discussions allow us to distinguish *the politics* (as a regime of policy making) from *the political*. This is a key distinction due to the colonization of the political by the politics through depoliticization of the politics and reducing it to experts' decisions. The striking example of this is *governance* as the best way of participatory politics. But the plain fact is that the political requires equality, contains the heterogeneity of the social, and is aware of the non-existence of a society as a coherent order (Swyngedouw, 2011). The Gezi Uprisings were the moment of reclaiming the equal power over their own lives not the mercy of the government. The people realized that the political (which has been maligned as “ideological”) is the very essence of their lives. What is more, *the politics* keep control of *the political* within the institutional boundaries. This event is the moment of freeing *the political* and realizing its importance to build a real democracy.

Concluding Remarks

The encounters that take place in any struggle give participants the opportunity to notice the common problems, as well as their struggles' potential common grounds. After all, the politicized masses, who are excluded from decision-making mechanisms and seen only as votes to manipulate, can only realize their power by experiencing it in their own surroundings. This is exactly why urban social movements organized around a variety of concrete problems have the important potential to convert these mobilizations into a more

comprehensive struggle, in short, to unite them all. This can only be possible if each participant in these local movements manages to see the whole picture and can thus interpret the political dimensions of the reality. The importance of the actual movements is in any case undeniable. These movements express a restlessness that is shared by people all over the world, and this unrest is as global as the financial system itself.

If there is a broad lesson to be drawn from the Gezi Uprisings, it is that democracy is essential for everybody. However, it will not be gifted. We have to struggle for a real democracy. This experience was also an obvious proof that we are at the very end of *the politics* in the sense that we know (Önder, 2013). We are all sure that nothing will be the same since we practiced solidarity and democracy, since we tasted them. We gained a consciousness from the praxis, not from the theory. As Marx and Engels (1968: 11) perfectly put it in *The German Ideology*: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” This is not an issue of chicken and egg problem, it is a question of having experienced and internalized the conflicts and their very causes within our everyday lives. These experiences shape our awareness about our own realities. There are many examples of this kind, but the one that is most conspicuous is the recent global economic crisis that is serving as a process of awakening for the masses that are mostly affected. Day by day, they are realizing what is happening through their own everyday life experiences.

Now, it is time to overcome any otherization imposed on us, it is time to find other ways of doing politics as political beings. It is time to discuss whether there is a better public place than the streets that we took or not. It is just the beginning of our era that we will take the control of our own lives.

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