Everywhere Taksim

Toktamis, Kumru, David, Isabel

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Introduction

Gezi in Retrospect

Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış

In late May and June of 2013, an encampment protesting the privatisation of the historic Gezi Park, in the public and commercially vibrant Taksim Square, in Istanbul, began as a typical urban social movement for defending individual rights and freedoms and public space, with no particular political affiliation. Thanks to a brutal police response and a brazen reaction by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the mobilisation soon snowballed into nationwide anti-government protests (79 out of 81 cities, mobilising 2.5 to 3 million people) (İnsan Hakları Derneği 2013). A coalition of the urban, educated, working- and middle classes was crafted with varying social and cultural concerns about both perceived and actual social encroachments as well as the policies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).

The moderately Islamist AKP party has now been in power for more than a decade and has achieved three national and three local landslide victories in elections since 2002. It has reorganized wealth within the capitalist classes while shifting political and social hierarchies of urban populations by rearranging (i.e. simultaneously expanding and limiting) rights and freedoms. It has liberalized the display of religious symbols like headscarves in public spaces such as universities, established non-violent, albeit still patronizing, civic communication channels with minorities such as Kurds and Armenians, all of which have shaken the state-secular elites’ sense of cultural and political dominance. Yet, growing informal and arbitrary control over freedom of the press, occasional limitations on social media outlets such as YouTube and Twitter, non-responsive and evasive actions by government officials at times of public disasters and other social crises have also caused widespread insolence and insubordination among the public. The AKP regime in Turkey has been a paradoxical one with increasing political and social polarisation. This is largely caused by the growing authoritarian and micro-managing attitudes of the prime

minister, galvanizing the sentiments of former elites who had enveloped their lives with the certainties of a Republican regime guarded by the military establishment; an establishment now effectively muzzled.

The Gezi protests and ensuing popular uprisings in many corners of the country may be a threshold, marking a cultural shift away from authoritarian forms of political activism in Turkey. The opposition has certainly been shedding its authoritarian uniformity and elite exclusivity and is becoming more democratic, multicultural, and inclusive. The slogan ‘Everywhere Taksim,’ which emerged in the days of the protests, marked the convergence of the rallying point of all demonstrations and uprisings outside Istanbul, signalling the spirit of frustration, resistance and indignation expressed at Gezi Park.

Gezi is a nine-acre urban park built over an ancient Armenian graveyard and an Ottoman Artillery Barracks in Taksim Square in the heart of Istanbul. Taksim has been a site of student protests and labour mobilisation since the 1960s. During the ‘Bloody Sunday’ of February 1969, demonstrators, protesting against the US 6th Fleet’s visit to Istanbul, were attacked by right-wing militia; two were killed and 150 were injured (Ahmad 1977). Taksim has also been the site of 1 May rallies since 1975. The Labour Day Massacre of May 1977 took place there too, when half a million demonstrators were indiscriminately fired upon by unidentified snipers from a municipal building. The official, albeit contested, number of deaths was 34 and the unofficial number of wounded reached 250. Since then, there have been occasional peaceful, but often intensely negotiated, May Day rallies at Taksim Square, whenever the authorities grant permission.

A project to construct a shopping centre on this location is among the multiple urban commercialisation and redevelopment projects undertaken by the Metropolitan Istanbul Municipality, controlled by elected pro-Islamic officials since the mayoral tenure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan between 1994 and 1998. The reorganisation and redevelopment plan for Taksim was initiated in 2009 by the government and in September 2011 the Istanbul Municipality Council, including the members of the opposition parties, unanimously approved the pedestrianisation part of the project, which was partially contracted in 2012. Almost immediately, the project was challenged by the Istanbul Chamber of Architects and the Istanbul Chamber of City Planners (both affiliated to the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği, TMMOB), who petitioned courts in May 2012. They were seeking a cessation

of all the projects on the grounds that the plans for commercialisation were inconsistent with the principles of urban planning and violated the regulations of urban historical preservation. Consequently, the project was rejected in two separate courts in 2013, just around the time the clashes started. An administrative court stayed the redevelopment plans on 31 May and an appeal to another administrative court upheld this verdict on 6 June.

These efforts by the professional chamber associations were closely supported by neighbourhood groups, united under the umbrella initiative Taksim Solidarity (Taksim Dayanışması). 2012 had already been a year full of activism for Taksim Solidarity. Prior to 2013, there were at least three large-scale demonstrations organised by the professional chambers and local community organisations, protesting the redevelopment and commercialisation projects. At a demonstration in early March, the second largest labour federation in the country, the Confederation of Progressive Trades Unions of Turkey (Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, DİSK), joined forces with the professional chambers and local community organisations as the union president declared the symbolic and historical significance of this particular urban square for the labour and socialist movement. He suggested that Prime Minister Erdoğan was acting like an Ottoman Sultan and ignoring the opposition. At the same protest, representatives of the Taksim Solidarity movement were determined to prevent a fait accompli, defining the renewal project as the elimination of human beings, the erection of concrete structures and the loss of the square’s authenticity.

As the official bidding process to identify and appoint the contractors started, a second large-scale demonstration was called in late June of 2012. During an uneventful summer, the parties continued their court battles and by October 2012, some cafes on the square started receiving their eviction papers. The coalition of groups resisting the project started petition campaigns and called for another mass demonstration on 14 October. By early November, members of coalition groups were taking turns to ‘guard the park’ as the preparations for construction were underway.

As the construction work was starting in January 2013, Taksim Solidarity, together with the students of the Faculty of Architecture of Istanbul Technical University, called for common breakfasts at the park every Sunday,
starting on 26 January. They initiated another large-scale demonstration with the professional chambers on 15 February. A neighbourhood organisation called the Association for the Protection and Improvement of Taksim was officially created in March, collecting more than 80,000 signatures against the development and organising a music and dance festival on 14 April, which was attended by hundreds of citizens and a few officials of the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP). By May 2013, Taksim Solidarity was still organising vigils at the park every Saturday between 3 pm and 6 pm. By 27 May, when police forces started to evacuate the park, hundreds of civic organisations were already in coordination, using social media to make public calls for the space to be defended.

The brutal eviction of around fifty young people occupying the park to save approximately 600 trees in late May turned into nationwide protests and clashes throughout the month of June, exacerbated by the excessive use of police force against peaceful demonstrators. Gezi was re-opened to the public on 1 June and immediately re-occupied by an increasing number of groups from all walks of life; thousands of people marched, some displaying Turkish flags. Taking the streets and even the bridges, denizens of Istanbul reached out to Gezi from different districts of the city, throughout the night, determined to support and shelter young people from further police brutality. The popularity of the occupiers among the city dwellers became clear with the march of more than 10,000 football fans, in an uncharacteristic display of fraternity on 8 June.

For almost two weeks, the park turned into a forum for public festivities with makeshift libraries, kitchens, seminars, concerts, classes from maths to yoga, as well as ongoing clashes with the police force, as the world’s attention turned to Istanbul and other cities in Turkey where demonstrators expressed support for the Gezi protestors and vocalized a wide scope of grievances, ranging from freedom of expression to defence of state secularist principles. Forums developed in several cities. These public forums have now become a constitutive part of localized protests and negotiations, mostly related to issues of neighbourhood redevelopment and democratic participation.

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7 Interviews with Taksim Solidarity representatives. For the vigils, see http://www.sendika.org/2012/11/taksim-nobeti-gunlugu-taksim-dayanismasi/.
In early June, Prime Minister Erdoğan dismissed the protestors in his now famous ‘a few çapulcus’ speech. This labelling of the protesters as ‘looters’ was immediately re-appropriated by the protestors with an irreverent twist and developed into an anglicized neologism, ‘chapulling,’ loosely referring to ‘fighting for one’s rights.’ Penguins were to constitute another symbol of resistance, irreverence and cognitive disconnect of the media eager to support the government, when CNN Türk chose to air a documentary on the lives of these polar birds instead of broadcasting the protests.

The two weeks of encampment at Gezi Park was a fresh yet exhilarating moment in Turkey’s political history. During the intensification of these political confrontations, the government’s responses to the protests were not uniform. Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, who had categorically denied the protestors’ list of demands, apologised for the ‘excessive use of police force’ on 4 June. President Abdullah Gül, who had called for moderation in early June, also took it upon himself to announce the suspension of the redevelopment plans in mid-July. Throughout this period, the prime minister was the only political figure who was unwavering in his defence of the redevelopment project and condemnation of the protests as conspiracies against his rule. His supporters staged a midnight welcoming demonstration upon his return from a North African visit on 7 June, asking for his permission ‘to crash Gezi.’ Banking on a form of majoritarianism that has replaced any democratic treatment of his opposition, Erdoğan insinuated that 50 per cent of the population in Turkey was ready to attack and destroy ‘Everywhere Taksim’ protests across the country. Following a series of impatient and brusque warnings to end the protests and the encampments, the prime minister held a meeting with the representatives of the protestors during the early hours of 14 June, during which he declared that the future of the project would be decided by a referendum. At his subsequent counter rallies in Ankara and Istanbul on 15 and 16 June, he reiterated his support for the redevelopment project and called for ‘respect

for the national will," while addressing his 300,000 supporters and as the police operation to ‘clean’ Taksim Square was heading towards its most brutal phase.

In sum, ‘Everywhere Taksim’ was more than an environmental resistance located in one urban park; it was a series of popular uprisings and demonstrations throughout Turkey, particularly between 31 May and 25 June, with participants from a wide array of social groups: Alevis, religious people, Kurds, women, Christians, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI), Kemalists and football fans. The peaceful co-existence between these very diverse and, until then, antagonistic groups demonstrates that something greater happened at Gezi: the creation of a spirit of tolerance that may well sow the seeds for a new Turkey.

The Turkish Medical Association announced that more than 10,000 people were wounded, some critically, during the six weeks of protests. According to the Istanbul Bar Association, more than 900 people were detained in Istanbul alone during the first few weeks. As a result of excessive police force used against unarmed demonstrators eleven people lost their lives, including one policemen in Adana and at least three possible bystanders. Notably, many of the young men, between the ages of 15 and 26, who were killed by police attacks were Alevis (a progressive religious sect that has been politically and culturally marginalized by the AKP regime). The first fatality was Ethem Sarısülük (26), in Ankara on 1 June, later followed by Mehmet Ayvalıtaş (20) in Istanbul, Abdullah Cömert (22) in Antakya, Medeni Yıldırım (18) in Diyarbakır, Ali İsmail Korkmaz (19) in Eskişehir and, most recently, Berkin Elvan (15) in Istanbul, who died after nine months in a coma. In September 2013, Ahmet Atakan also died during a follow-up protest in Antakya.

This volume has two goals: to make sense of the significance of the Gezi protests and to contribute to the literature on social movements in Turkey. It will be contended that Gezi represents a major landmark in Turkey, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Gezi protests showed the world the authoritarian nature of the ruling AKP, shredding the image it had constructed as a liberal democratic party, one that would be capable of acting as a model of reconciliation between Islam and democracy. The protests further proved

that democratisation in Turkey still has a long way to go. Secondly, Gezi acted as a trigger for the repoliticisation of Turkish society and especially of younger generations, until then considered apathetic. Thirdly, the Gezi protests constitute evidence of a major sociological change in Turkish society, for they provided the first platform for the unification of antagonistic groups, such as LGBTI, Islamists, headscarved women, Kemalists, feminists, Alevi, and Kurds. Thus, Gezi was a turning point for overcoming Turkey’s deep cleavages. A fourth argument advanced in this volume is that Gezi constituted a branch of the wider global resistance and protest movements that have swept the globe of late.

For this purpose, the volume bridges a collection of field research, qualitative and quantitative data, theoretical approaches and transnational comparative contributions. The analyses include a broad spectrum of disciplines, including Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Social Psychology, International Relations and Political Economy. With its interdisciplinary content and approaches, the volume provides a solid base for historical, local, global and regional comparative analyses. The essays reflect the multidimensional qualities of social movements and provide grounds for further research about Turkish society as well as about the Middle East and Europe.

The contributions to this volume are structured around five broad themes, which try to encompass the main focal points of the protests. Section I addresses the issue of how AKP’s rule failed to deliver on the expectations of liberalisation and democratisation in its eleven years of power. These acted as the perceived triggers for the Gezi protests. Section II looks at the neoliberal reforms enacted by the party and how the AKP has sought to consolidate its hegemony through them. At the same time, however, these reforms have alienated and excluded a substantial portion of the population from the benefits of capitalism. Section III deals with protestors and repertoires of protest: in a civil society seen as apathetic, the protests surprised, not only because they brought together completely different and, sometimes, antagonistic sections of the Turkish population, but also for their creativity. Section IV considers the issue of public spaces as loci of contention; it further contends that space is constitutive of identity. Finally, Section V refers to the reverberation of the protests in the international sphere.

The volume opens with Kumru F. Toktamış’s enlightening comparison between the two major mass mobilisations against the AKP government: the 2007 protests and the Gezi protests. Through this comparison, the author uncovers the shifting patterns of nationhood in Turkey: from a...
top-down approach, prevalent in the 2007 Republican demonstrations, to a multiculturalist one, unveiled by the Gezi protests. Following this idea, and building on discursive and relational approaches from Charles Tilly and Rogers Brubaker, Toktamış contends that despite the party’s growing authoritarian tendencies, the AKP period may be seen as one of the most vibrant in the history of Turkish democracy, given the increasing political involvement of people from all walks of life.

Jeremy F. Walton’s chapter engages in a mediation between the narratives of the proponents and the opponents of the protests by focusing on the figure of the çapulcu, which ultimately created a common identity out of heterogeneous groups. In order to do so, Walton combines three elements that can be identified in the Gezi protests: the politicisation of urban space, with an emphasis on Taksim square; the Bakhtinian concept of ‘carnival’; and the inclusion of the Gezi protests as a branch of the global protest movement across the globe.

Ana Dević’s and Marija Krštić’s chapter presents an insightful comparison of the protests in Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The authors focus on elite behaviour in both countries and the failed promises and expectations regarding democratisation and social and economic improvements as the source of protests. To this end, Dević and Krštić conducted field research by interviewing Gezi activists on their perception of measures pertaining to democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms enacted by the AKP. The authors analyse the similar nature of the profile of protestors in both countries, identifying them as the elements excluded from the dominant political system.

Umut Bozkurt’s chapter focuses on the interplay between the factors that explain AKP’s hegemony and the impact of the Gezi protests on this hegemony. To this end, the author makes use of the concept of ‘neoliberal populism,’ interpreted in a Gramscian fashion. This hegemony has been secured, Bozkurt argues, not only through neoliberal economic policies that favour the interests of the economic bourgeoisie, but also through the use of symbolic and religious codes such as Sunni Islam, conservatism and nationalism. The author contends that, as a result of the Gezi protests, the AKP’s previously expansive hegemony has been transformed into a limited hegemony.

Barış Alp Özden’s and Ahmet Bekmen’s contribution presents an important comparison of the protests that occurred in Turkey and Brazil, given the similarities behind their motivations and in terms of the social composition of the demonstrators. They explore how the dominant neoliberal populist practice in both countries depoliticizes structural social problems, creates
non-class forms of identity and representation, and thus attempts to defuse social conflict. Özden and Bekmen contend that, ultimately, neoliberal regimes are creating a class consciousness among the labouring classes that might trigger the formation of an alternative hegemonic bloc.

İlke Civelekoğlu’s chapter argues for a political economy-based explanation of the reasons behind the Gezi protests. Drawing from Karl Polanyi, the author argues that Gezi demonstrators took to the streets in order to resist the commercialisation of land as well as the commodification of labour brought about by neoliberal policies. Civelekoğlu then engages in a discussion about whether the protestors can be seen as a societal countermovement, aiming to halt market expansion with the goal of protecting society. In this respect, the author discusses the implications and the outcomes of the protests for Turkish democracy.

Özden Melis Uluğ and Yasemin Gülüsüm Acar offer a social psychological perspective on the Gezi Park protesters by focusing on social identity theory as an underlying explicative tool for collective action. The authors contend that the defining moment for the creation of a shared identity was the internalisation of the word çapulcu. The authors conducted a series of interviews with activists participating in the protests in different cities across Turkey. As a result of their diversity (including Alevi, Anti-capitalist Muslims, Revolutionary Muslims, members of the football fan group Çarşı, women’s rights activists, Kemalists, Kurdish activists, LGBTI activists, trades union members, members of the Communist Party of Turkey [Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP] and Ülkücüler), these valuable interviews allow the reader to perceive the variegated reasons behind the protests. They also bring to the fore a number of shared perceptions that helped unite these often opposing/clashing segments of Turkish society.

Dağhan Irak’s chapter offers a groundbreaking view of one of Gezi’s most visible actors – the football fans. The author explains how football fandom became increasingly politicised by the growing commodification of the sport and rising AKP interference in football regulations and in fans’ lifestyles. These changes, Irak argues, allowed for the creation of a common ground between Istanbul’s major football fans, until then divided by micro-nationalisms. In this respect, and using the Bourdesian concept of ‘cultural capital,’ the Gezi protests may eventually be seen as a springboard for the creation of a fan-based political supra-entity. The chapter thus paves the way for further study on the effects of commodification processes and precariousness on the growing politicisation of sports fans.

Lerna K. Yanık provides another innovative approach to the Gezi protests through the lens of visual humour, laying the foundations for a research
agenda on graffiti and political humour in Turkey. In order to do so, the author photographed and conducted an analysis of graffiti written during the June 2013 events and how these were used to challenge authority. Additionally, the chapter operates as a valuable tool for the memorialisation of the forms of protest that took place, as all of the graffiti have been erased from the streets of Istanbul.

Volkan Yılmaz’s and Pınar Gümüş’s chapter brings yet another invaluable contribution to the study of the Gezi protests. The authors deconstruct the conventional idea that the Turkish youth was apolitical and further explain how this newly politicised youth was highly influential in the development of the protests. Namely, Yılmaz and Gümüş demonstrate how young people, as members of already existing social movements, transferred their organisational features, their political discourses and their forms of creating and sustaining solidarity networks to the Gezi protests. The authors’ findings are supported by field research conducted before and after Gezi.

Ahu Karasulu’s chapter analyses the acts of continued resistance that began with Gezi under the theoretical framework of Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow’s Dynamics of Contention, with an emphasis on the spatial dimension of claims. The author contends, in a dialectical fashion, that contention is not only affected by space but also that it produces space. The fact that space symbolises power must be seen as the key to understanding Taksim Square, which is the symbol of both the Republic and secularism. In trying to close the Square or gentrify it, the government displays power and tries to depoliticise this particular space. Thus, Taksim becomes a symbol of resistance for those who oppose government policies.

Emrah Çelik discusses the role of religion in the protests. Through a series of in-depth interviews with secularist demonstrators and activists, the author shows how one of the main concerns was government interference in lifestyles and not opposition to religion as such. The interviews with religious elements at the park, on the other hand, offer valuable insights into the rejection of what is perceived as the anti-religious capitalism promoted by the AKP. One of Çelik’s main findings is the growing acceptance of religion by secularists, especially among the younger generations, and how Gezi helped cement that spirit of tolerance, in a major sociological shift in Turkish society.

Clara Rivas Alonso’s chapter demonstrates how the protests were fuelled by the AKP policy on urban construction, a pillar of Turkish economic growth, establishing a direct link between urban exclusion and social unrest. The author focuses on the events at Gezi through the prism of the occupation of the public spaces as an exercise of social participation,
grassroots alliances and identity construction. In order to better understand how space is constitutive of identity, the author brings to public knowledge invaluable maps of space occupation by the different groups in the so-called Gezi Republic. Seen as a mahalle (‘neighbourhood’), Gezi Park provided a ‘sphere of possibility’ – a space of solidarity and tolerance.

Bahar Baser provides yet another ground-breaking study on the way the Gezi spirit was perceived and picked up by the Turkish and Kurdish diasporas in Sweden, Germany, France and the Netherlands. Based on fieldwork observation and semi-structured interviews, the author explains the role of the diasporas in both denouncing the violent repression of the protests and clarifying their goals in their hostlands. Baser concludes that these acts of solidarity constituted a branch of home events and, as in Turkey, diaspora protests created a sense of fraternity among previously opposing groups.

Beken Saatçioğlu’s chapter concludes the volume with a ground-breaking chapter on the implications of the events at Gezi for Turkey’s European Union (EU) accession process. Given that the EU has perceived Gezi as evidence of the AKP straying from democratic standards, the author contends that EU-Turkey relations will, from now on, be guided mainly by normative considerations, and not, as before, by intergovernmental or rationalist ones. Saatçioğlu observes a two-fold behaviour emerging from these relations between the parties: on the one hand, Turkey’s compliance with democratic norms can be used by the EU to veto, postpone or suspend accession negotiations; on the other, the Union will keep the negotiations open as a policy instrument in order to promote democratisation.

Bibliography


