Introduction: Gezi and Rumi’s Elephant in the Dark

Some Hindus have an elephant to show. No one here has ever seen an elephant. They bring it at night to a dark room. One by one, we go in the dark and come out saying how we experience the animal. One of us happens to touch the trunk. ‘A water-pipe kind of creature.’ Another, the ear. ‘A very strong, always moving back and forth, fan-animal.’ Another, the leg. ‘I find it still, like a column on a temple.’ Another touches the curved back. ‘A leathery throne.’ Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk. ‘A rounded sword made of porcelain.’ He’s proud of his description. Each of us touches one place and understands the whole in that way. – Rumi, ‘Elephant in the Dark’ (Rumi 1995, 252)

In the immediate wake of the Gezi uprising of summer 2013, which shook Turkish political society to its foundations, local and global pundits alike imitated the men in the dark of Rumi’s famous parable: attempting to grasp the totality of the elephant that was Gezi, they mistook specific aspects of the demonstration for its whole. For some, Gezi was principally a matter of class resentment; for others, it was solely a denunciation of the governing AKP. Yet another chorus of voices emphasised the relationship between Gezi and ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey, especially Alevis. Like Rumi’s sightless men, commentators seized on various parts of the beast, without fully envisioning the whole.

The bulk of interpretations of Gezi crystallised around a dominant polarity. This polarity focused on the relationship between the demonstrations and the AKP, with particular emphasis on the figure of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Two competing narratives emerged. For most supporters of the protests, Gezi marked an unprecedented outpouring of public, liberal dissent, aimed both at Erdoğan’s draconian pronouncements and at the pervasive illiberality of the Turkish state and political culture more generally. Defenders of the government, on the other hand, articulated a counter-narrative – in their estimation, Gezi was merely the reactionary spasm of a crumbling elite, previously favoured by the illiberal state, that
has witnessed its privileges and prerogatives erode in the context of a new
turkish political culture.

My aspiration in this essay is to pursue a multi-faceted reading of Gezi
that mediates between, and thereby unravels, these two polar interpreta-
tions. In doing so, I forward a comprehensive portrait of Gezi that avoids
substituting one part of the protest for its whole – only by doing so can we
hope to grasp the entirety of this elephant. In what follows, I take up three
distinct features of the Gezi demonstrations: the historical roots of the
politicisation of public, urban space in Republican Turkey, with particular
reference to Taksim Square; the character of the protests as a post-modern,
Bakhtinian carnival; and, the resonances of the demonstrations with other
recent outpourings of mass dissent across the globe. In order to unite these
three themes – the genealogy of public space, protest as carnival and the
global horizons of contemporary protest – I focus on the character of the
çapulcu (roughly translatable as ‘looter’), which came to define Gezi’s het-
erogeneous demonstrators and remains one of the most distinctive legacies
of the protests. As I argue, the semiotic and political density of the
çapulcu defies the simple polarity between liberal dissent and populist legitimacy
that has defined the two dominant narratives about the demonstrations.

The Politics of Public Space in Urban Turkey: Taksim Square,
Proscenium of the Nation

In recent years, a bevy of social scientists has directed attention to the
dense relationship between the aesthetics of public space and political
argument in contemporary Turkey. Generally, these theorists have traced
the myriad transformations of politics and public space that have charac-
terised Turkey since the 1980s, beginning with the restoration of civilian
government in 1983 following the 12 September 1980 military coup and
the subsequent neoliberal reforms of the Turgut Özal era (Öniş 2004).¹
Among the markers of the vivid, neoliberal public sphere of Turkey are: a
profusion of commodities in all public spaces (Kandiyoti and Saktanber
2002); a recalibration of the relationship between statism and public space,
with a particular proliferation of informal rituals of the state (Navaro-Yashin
2002; Özyürek 2006; Hart 1999); and a renaissance of pre-Republican, Neo-
Ottoman discourses and aesthetic forms (Walton 2010). Furthermore, this

¹ http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12907/brand-turkey-and-the-gezi-protests_authori-
tarianis.
newly fragmented public sphere has also witnessed a reorientation and retrenchment of Kemalist secularism, both as a congeries of commodities (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006) and as a mass subject of political protest (Tambar 2009). To paraphrase an argument made by anthropologist Chris Dole (2012), neoliberal Turkish public space articulates a new ‘distribution of the sensible,’ in which the verities of Turkish statism, nationalism and Kemalism can no longer be taken for granted.

With this broader context in mind, the incalculable importance of Taksim Square as the site of the Gezi demonstrations comes into focus. As Alev Çınar (2005, 110 ff.) has argued, the city of Istanbul in general and Taksim Square in particular maintain pride of place within a Turkish Republican imaginary of modern, secular nationhood. Even as Ankara was rapidly developed as the post-Ottoman capital in the 1920s and 1930s, Istanbul continued to constitute the privileged stage for the drama of Turkish nationhood. The centrality of Istanbul to Turkey as a whole has become even more entrenched in recent decades, as the new ‘global city’ (Sassen 1991) mediates the relationship between the nation and transnational political, economic and cultural flows (cf. Appadurai 1996). Throughout Republican Turkish history, Taksim Square has functioned as a proscenium on the political theatre of Istanbul and Turkey generally. Although the square and its surrounding districts were a lively area of the city during the late Ottoman period – the nearby neighbourhoods of Beyoğlu and Pera were the undisputed centre of European-oriented Istanbul, home to large Greek and Armenian Christian communities as well as a substantial number of Western European expatriates – the relationship between Taksim and the revolutionary state project of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his cohorts was cemented in the early decades of the Republic.²

Arguably, the most important material embodiment and index of the statist, secularist dispensation of Taksim is the Republic Monument (Cumhuriyet Anıtı), which stands at the centre of the square. Designed by renowned Italian architect Pietro Canonica, the monument was erected in 1928. Its eleven-metre-tall bulk features two massive bronze statues of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In the north-facing sculpture, Atatürk leads a battalion in a military operation; in the second, south-facing sculpture, he strikes a diplomatic pose in a neat three-piece suit, flanked by other key figures from the Turkish War of Independence (Kurtuluş Savaşı), including İsmet İnönü and Fevzi Çakmak. Thus, the two sides of the monument express Atatürk’s two key roles as warrior and statesman – in one form or

² For a more thorough history of Taksim Square in Turkish, see Gülersöy 1994.
another, he gazes in panoptical fashion over the entirety of the square. Of nearly equal importance to the Kemalist aesthetics of Taksim is a more recent structure, the Atatürk Cultural Centre (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, AKM), which dominates the eastern side of the square. A state institution, the AKM features the most prominent opera hall and performance space in the district; on national holidays, its stark modernist façade is reliably draped with a gigantic banner depicting Atatürk, accompanied by the requisite phalanx of Turkish flags.

Given the centrality of the square as a site for the insignia of nation and state, debates over the transformation of built space in Taksim quickly become synecdochic of political fissures in Turkey more broadly. In the late 1970s, Taksim witnessed extensive political violence among both civilian right- and left-wing paramilitary groups and the military and security forces; most notoriously, the 1977 May Day demonstrations in the square resulted in the death of between 34 and 42 protestors and union members at the hands of the security forces, one of the key events that precipitated the military coup of 12 September 1980. More recently, Taksim has been at the epicentre of seismic political debates over the public visibility of Islam in contemporary Turkey. During his tenure as the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) Mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s, Erdoğan forwarded a controversial, ultimately unsuccessful plan to construct a massive mosque on Taksim Square. As Çınar (2005, 115) cogently argues, the mosque proposal directly contradicted the secularist dispensation of the Square in general, and the Republic Monument in particular:

The secularist opposition (to the mosque) was not against the idea of a new mosque in itself. Several other mosques had been built in Istanbul, and none of these had become controversial. But Taksim Square is not just anyplace; it is the center of Istanbul, circumscribed by the monumental structures of official Turkish modernity and secular nationalism. For secularists, it was unthinkable for the Republic Monument, with the figure of Atatürk at the fore and standing right at the center of the square, to be overshadowed by a huge mosque.

Erdoğan’s more recent proposal to overhaul the entirety of the Taksim Square – the flashpoint that ignited the Gezi Demonstrations – is merely the latest iteration of this sharp debate over the place of Islam in Taksim. It is difficult to imagine a more provocative redevelopment proposal than that forwarded by Erdoğan’s coterie. This proposal revived the idea of a massive mosque on the square – Erdoğan commissioned a design from the
famous architect Ahmet Vefik Alp, although he later rejected the design as reportedly ‘too modern.’ More importantly, the plan to overhaul Taksim called for the demolition of both Gezi Park – a small stand of crabgrass and sycamores on the north side of the square – and the aforementioned AKM. In their place, Erdoğan’s plan calls for the construction of a replica of an Ottoman-era military depot, the Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks (Halil Paşa Topçu Kışlası), which would house a shopping centre. More so than the mosque itself, this proposed irruption of Neo-Ottoman aesthetic forms within the Republican-Kemalist space of Taksim constituted the transgression of a political Rubicon.

As I have argued at length elsewhere (Walton 2010), Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) throughout Istanbul have reoriented the aesthetics of urban space along Neo-Ottoman lines in recent years. On the whole, however, these Neo-Ottoman transformations of urban space have remained cloistered in neighbourhoods such as Fatih and Eyüp, which are already known for their public Muslim piety; by contrast, the current proposal intervenes directly within the privileged secular space of Taksim. Furthermore, the agent of this transformation is not a relatively depoliticised civil society group (Walton 2013), but Erdoğan and the AKP. From his foreign policy to his bellicose public posturing, Erdoğan has echoed and embodied Ottoman precedents in various ways. Thus, his proposal to rebuild an Ottoman-era military institution in the definitively Republican space of Taksim Square might easily be read as an effort to turn back the clock of history and unseat the basic principles of the Republic itself. The fact that this Neo-Ottoman space will house a shopping centre – an emblem and beachhead of globalised consumer culture in Turkey (Ayata 2002) – only underscores the dense relationship between the AKP and the neoliberal transformations of Turkey’s society and economy broadly, a point that the Gezi protesters emphasised.

3 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/24/world/europe/mosque-dream-seen-at-heart-of-turkey-protests.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Notably, Erdoğan emphasised that he would prefer an ‘Ottoman-style’ mosque to Alp’s postmodern confection.
5 According to the latest court decision on the matter, issued in March 2014, the legal challenge to revoke the previous approval of the proposal to build the replica Military Barracks was rejected – in other words, the plan to build the replica is, at time of writing, moving forward. http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/topcu_kislasi_onayi_uygundur-1180789.
The metastasisation of the Gezi Park protests from a small group of environmentalists to a heterogeneous crowd of tens of thousands over the course of a few days would have been unimaginable anywhere in Turkey other than Taksim Square. To understand this metastasisation, a perspective on the genealogy of public space and politics in Taksim is indispensable. That said, however, we should also take care not to reduce the Gezi demonstrations to a mere reaction to the potential incursion on the Kemalist secularity of Taksim Square. After all, the initial proposal to build a mosque on the square did not ignite a mass protest movement. Nor did the Gezi demonstrators constitute a mass Kemalist subject of the sort that Kabir Tambar describes in his analysis of the 2007 Republic demonstrations (Tambar 2009; see also Öktem 2011, 151-154). Much has been made of the participation of a group known as the Anti-Capitalist Muslims (Antikapitalist Müslümanlar) in the Gezi uprising; as a member of an NGO affiliated to the Anti-Capitalist Muslims emphasised to me in an interview in March 2014, the definitive cleavage of Gezi was not that between Islam and secularism, but between justice and injustice (adalet ve adaletsizlik/haksızlık). Rather than reducing Gezi to the politics of secularism and Islam – rather than mistaking part of the elephant for the whole – we must endeavour to grasp the novel political subjectivities and practices of citizenship that Gezi witnessed and fostered. The following section, on the semiotic and political anatomy of the çapulcu, represents just such an endeavour.

The Carnivalesque Citizenship of the Çapulcu

In the days and weeks after the demonstrations against the proposed demolition of Gezi Park first broke out on 27 May 2013, it became clear that they marked a historically new formation and subject of the political in Turkey. As the protests swelled with the characteristic velocity of the networked, social media present (Castells 2012), observers quickly took note of the distinctive, novel heterogeneity of the protestors themselves. Sociologist Nilüfer Göle’s assessment is exemplary:

The Gezi movement has united people in a square and around a tree against the polarizing policies and rhetoric of the ruling party. It has brought together people, ideas, lifestyles and clubs that are hard to get to come together, including young and old people, students and bureaucrats,

feminists and housewives, Muslims and leftists, Kurds and Alevi, Kemalists and communists, Fenerbahçe and Beşiktas supporters. These people might have taken the stage perhaps only for a moment, but that moment has been engraved on the square and on the collective memory.8

What mode of unity might mediate this heterogeneity? Would such unity be merely negative? Clearly, a political identity, with its attendant homogeneity, singularity and coherence, would necessarily fail to capture the Gezi demonstrators – indeed, as Göle notes, Gezi was defined by the conglomeration of multiple political identities. What linked the protestors was not an identity, but a novel, emphatic practice of citizenship, a public performativity. Ironically, Prime Minister Erdoğan provided the rubric that ultimately united the protestors. On 2 June, during his first public response to the mounting protests, Erdoğan snidely dismissed the demonstrators as mere criminals and ‘looters’ (çapulcular).9 With Twitter and Facebook as their tribunes, the protesters gleefully seized on the label çapulcu – a previously obscure Turkish noun – and appropriated it as their own.

Above all, the çapulcu is a subversive, carnivalesque figure (see also Şener 2013). Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 7) famously theorised the carnivalesque as a time-space (or chronotope) of inversion:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.

The carnivalesque nature of the çapulcu is immediately evident in a brief Youtube video titled ‘Everyday I’m Çapulling,’ which compiles a series of video clips from the protests.10 Among the images featured are:

10 The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVoNTUYoZIs. Accessed 10 June 2014.
a sea of Turkish flags; teargas canisters flying through the air; a protestor pummelled by a water cannon in Taksim Square; a young man in a gas mask performing Michael Jackson’s signature ‘Moon Dance’; groups of demonstrators performing a folk dance (halay çekmek) in a circle; and, a cloaked protestor wearing a Guy Fawkes mask, the preeminent global icon of anarchic carnival. Despite the evident violence depicted – water cannons and teargas – the mood of the video is unambiguously one of celebration and jubilation, a fact that the drum-and-bass beat accompanying the visuals underscores.

As a figure of the carnivalesque, the çapulcu marshals and inaugurates a critical politics of fun (cf. Bayat 2007), one that had never before appeared on the stage of Turkish public life. This carnivalesque, public fun was the solvent that allowed for the absorption and transcendence of the many different political and social identities that gathered in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in the heady days of May and June. During a conversation in Istanbul a few weeks after the closing of Gezi Park, a friend who had participated daily in the demonstrations succinctly articulated this point to me: ‘I had never felt that way before. For the first time, there in Gezi, it didn’t matter who you were or where you were from. It was unique.’ As my friend’s reminiscence reveals, the aesthetics and sociality of the protests constituted a new moment of heterogeneity and multiplicity in Turkey. In the next section, I endeavour to contextualise the heterogeneity and multiplicity registered by the çapulcu in relation to the global horizons of contemporary protest at large.

Gezi and the Discontents of Neoliberal Globalisation

One of the most intractable questions raised by Gezi is that of the relationship between the Turkish demonstrations and the recent global protest movement as a whole. Many commentators, both within and beyond Turkey, have highlighted the myriad points of contact between Gezi and other protest movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy – seizure of public, urban space; heterogeneity of participation; reliance on social media. Beyond this general identification of common tropes and means, however, a more trenchant analysis of the relationship between global flows and local frictions in Gezi is still urgently needed. In this section, I argue the figure of the çapulcu, with its distinctive mediation of global and local logics, offers a vantage on Gezi that encompasses both its specificities and continuities with other sites of protest.
Among the sharpest interpretations of Gezi yet to emerge are those that focus on the demonstration’s relationship to the affective landscape of neoliberal globalisation. In his comparison between the Gezi Protests and anti-austerity demonstrations in Athens, Slavoj Žižek (2013) succinctly captures the power of the ambient unease that accompanies neoliberalism in its myriad loci:

It is also important to recognize that the protesters aren’t pursuing any identifiable ‘real’ goal. The protests are not ‘really’ against global capitalism, ‘really’ against religious fundamentalism, ‘really’ for civil freedoms and democracy, or ‘really’ about any one thing in particular. What the majority of those who have participated in the protests are aware of is a fluid feeling of unease and discontent that sustains and unites various specific demands.

Turkish sociologist Cihan Tuğal (2013, 167) makes a similar point about Gezi when he diagnoses a characteristic ‘impoverishment of social life’ on the part of the urban, white-collar professionals who made up a significant portion of the protesters as a dynamo of the uprising. As he puts it, ‘free market capitalism has actually delivered […] its promises: lucrative jobs, luxurious vacations, fancy cars, (at least the prospect of) comfortable homes, and many other forms of conspicuous consumption. Yet, none of this has resulted in fulfilling lives’. (Ibid.)

My own interpretation of the aetiology of Gezi parallels those forwarded by Žižek and Tuğal – like them, I also maintain that the subtle social and cultural transformations entailed by neoliberalism are fundamental to protest movements throughout the globe. To use a somewhat different theoretical lexicon, I propose that we consider the Gezi Protests as a direct response to an on-going transformation in the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière 2004; see also Dole 2012) in Turkish public life. This neoliberal restructuring of the distribution of the sensible and the novel politics and aesthetics that have accompanied it have entailed the substantial erosion of the statist Weltanschauung of Kemalism, even as they have ushered in new forms of alienation rooted in the ‘impoverishment of social life.’ It is against this backdrop that the figure of the çapulcu emerges with counter-hegemonic glee.

With its carnivalesque dissidence, the çapulcu parts ways with the rather dire, dour analyses forwarded by Žižek and Tuğal. Following Žižek, we can point to the çapulcu’s constitutive distance from all goal- and end-oriented political action – the çapulcu is not ‘really’ making any specific
political argument or demand. Indeed, as Bakhtin’s original analysis of the carnivalesque suggests, the very obfuscation of the distinction between audience and spectator that defines the social aesthetics of the carnival militates against end-oriented politics as such. Moving beyond Žižek and Tuğal, however, I argue that what draws us to the çapulcu, what makes the çapulcu so compelling, is precisely its ability to transduce and conduct the ambient unease of the neoliberal condition into the distinctive glee of postmodern carnival.

The politics of fun and the carnivalesque glee of the çapulcu also establish it squarely as a global political subject. When we look to Zuccotti Park, to Tahrir Square, to the intermittently seething streets of Kiev, Rio de Janeiro, Tel Aviv, Athens and Sarajevo, we can easily spot cousins of the çapulcu. If, as a number of theorists have argued, the contemporary global protest movement is a reaction of the global ‘multitude’ against the Empire of neoliberalism (Hardt and Negri 2000), the çapulcu may well be the most distinctive face of this global multitude. There is no reason why the verb ‘to çapul’ – another fertile Gezi neologism – should not apply beyond Turkey. That said, we should not rush to unmoor the çapulcu entirely from its local context – like all formations of the ‘multitude,’ the çapulcu necessarily synthesises global flows and local frictions in its performative density. While çapulcus across the world may wear Guy Fawkes masks, these masks will not uniformly articulate the same denigrations, discontents and demands.

Conclusion: Gezi and the Decoupling of Liberalism and Democracy in Turkey

In an influential volume, French political philosopher Chantal Mouffe inveighs against the conflation of liberalism and democracy characteristic of much contemporary political theory. She contends that with modern democracy, we are dealing with a new political form of society whose specificity comes from the articulation between two different traditions. On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights, and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation (Mouffe 2000, 2-3).
Mouffe’s formulation here echoes the polarity with which I began this paper: advocates and sympathisers of the Gezi demonstrations have marshalled a broadly liberal critique of Erdoğan’s demagogic democratic-populism, while defenders of the government have argued that democratic electoral legitimacy trumps liberal critique on the part of marginal or minority groups. In this respect, Gezi represents a crucial point of fracture between liberal and democratic political projects in Turkey, where the suturing of liberalism and democracy has always been more fraught than in the liberal democracies of the North Atlantic.

The decoupling of liberalism and democracy is thus a central narrative and facet of the Gezi demonstrations. This centrality, however, should not lead us to neglect the myriad other aspects of Gezi – like the men in Rumi’s parable, we must attempt to comprehend Gezi through detailed analyses of its constituent parts, vigilantly avoiding the substitution of part for whole. This essay represents one contribution in this collaborative, collative project. I have fashioned my argument with reference to three distinct themes – the genealogy of public, urban space in Taksim Square, the politics of carnival and the global resonances of Gezi – united by the figure of the çapulcu. It is fitting, then, to conclude by revisiting the çapulcu. Seen from a certain angle, the çapulcu is undeniably a figure of liberal democracy – it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the çapulcu separate from liberal democratic values and projects. As I have argued, however, the çapulcu is also irreducible to the dynamics of liberalism and democracy – its carnivalesque, counter-hegemonic glee, and the practices of citizenship that accompany this glee, are neither a simple expression of individual liberty, nor a romance of popular sovereignty. Indeed, I suspect that the çapulcu has further lessons to offer us regarding the politics of public space both within Turkey and across the global landscapes of the protest movement. And for that reason, I intend to continue çapulling, every day.

Bibliography


