9 Humour as Resistance?

A Brief Analysis of the Gezi Park Protest Graffiti

*Lerna K. Yanık*

**Background**

I first came across the Gezi Park graffiti while strolling up İstiklal Avenue after the first round of Gezi Park protests. When I saw these graffiti, I thought that I should work more like a chronicler than a political scientist, chronicling the graffiti that emerged during one of the most important anti-government protests in the history of modern Turkey. Working like a chronicler was important, because some of the graffiti (especially the ones that contained very foul or sexually explicit language) were being cleared, hourly, from the walls, disappearing, literally and figuratively, without a trace. At the time of writing, none of the graffiti that will be discussed in this chapter exist. They have all been cleared up.

The ephemeral nature of the graffiti renders a systematic study of Gezi Park graffiti difficult. Yet, this lack of possibility for systematic analysis still makes the study of graffiti in Turkey, especially humorous graffiti, important for three reasons. First is to document and record the graffiti that appeared (and then subsequently disappeared) during the protests in and around Gezi Park. Second is to examine how graffiti became part of the performative dissent, acting as a communicative tool delivering messages to various authority figures and thus challenging them at the same time. The third goal is to call for a research agenda based on graffiti and political humour in the Turkish context. Hopefully, this chapter sets or, at least, prepares the ground for this kind of research. Having highlighted the goals of this chapter, and because the paper carries elements of humour, let me also underline the fact that the goal of this paper is neither to romanticise, nor ridicule the Gezi Park events or various authority figures for that matter. So what I have in the following pages are the pictures of these graffiti collected in and around Gezi Park on various days in June 2013. The pictures of the graffiti that you will see here were photographed by me and Serhat Güvenç – a colleague who graciously agreed to let me to use the pictures that he took. Obviously, various different Gezi Park-related graffiti were circulated in social media during the protests and many more are still
on various websites. In addition to avoiding copyright issues, as I stated above, my goal is to bring a more academic perspective to the study of graffiti and political humour – especially in Turkey. As a result, the pictures photographed by me and Serhat Güvenç provide the main basis of this small step towards this endeavour. Needless to say, while I have borrowed some of the pictures, all the analyses in the following pages belong to me.

What is a Graffito? The Features of the Graffiti Collected around Gezi Park

A graffito, according to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, is a ‘form of visual communication, usually illegal, involving the unauthorized marking of public space by an individual or group. Technically the term applies to designs scratched through a layer of paint or plaster, but its meaning has been extended to other markings.’

Although the term graffiti is new – Merriam Webster says that it was invented around 1945 and comes from Italian – graffiti writing is an ancient act that even existed on the walls of Pompeii (Clarke 2007). Yet, the walls were not the only venues where Gezi Park graffiti showed up. As will be shown, in addition to various walls around the Taksim area, Gezi Park-related graffiti were drawn on the vehicles that were damaged during the protests, on signposts, even on mattresses hanging from windows. They were also glued on various objects (trees, signposts, trashcans, etc.) in Gezi Park.

While some of these Gezi Park protest graffiti contained humour, other graffiti contained foul and sexist language. In this chapter, my focus will mostly be on the humorous graffiti and will debate the functions and messages of these graffiti in potentially forming a challenge to authority. It should also be noted that during Gezi Park events, humour was not limited to graffiti. Humour, as coined by the protestors, was called ‘orantısız zeka’ (‘disproportionate intelligence’) – an intertextual reference to the term ‘excessive use’ of force (by the security forces), which is roughly translated to Turkish as ‘disproportionate use of force’ – and it was on Facebook and

---

Figure 9.1: A 'Wall' as a Venue for Graffiti

Figure 9.2: A 'Mattress' as a Venue for Graffiti
Twitter and could also be traced to the way some of the acts of disobedience, such as ‘the Standing Man,’ were organised.

**The Role and the Function of Graffiti and Humour: A Short Conceptual Overview**

Scholars have assigned different functions, respectively, to graffiti and humour. The research done in the 1970s, for example, has argued that graffiti exposed ‘patterns of customs and attitudes of a society’ (Stocker et al. 1972; Gonos et al. 1976; Green 2003) and, more importantly, because graffiti are ‘anonymous,’ it gave graffiti writers freedom to express things that they usually would not or may not be able to (Gonos et al. 1976). Accordingly, not only the content of each graffito, but also the sheer act of writing the graffiti on the wall is an attempt to challenge the political authority (Peteet 1996). Yet, at times, it might also be possible that graffiti may carry the messages that perpetuate the existing social structures. For example, some scholars who have worked on gang-related graffiti have argued that gang graffiti mark both territory and existing social hierarchies among and between the gangs (Adams and Winter 1997). While resisting authority, the act of writing graffiti carries different messages that contains ‘competing visions, possible futures’ and also can be ‘self-reflective and critical’ (Peteet 1996).

Similarly, humour, especially humour in politics, or political humour, is argued to be both a ‘sword and a shield’ (Helmy and Frerichs 2013, 450). Also known as the ‘paradox of humour’ (Sorensen 2008), humour is considered a way not only to deal with authority but also a tool that determines the in-group/out-group dynamics (Oring 2004; Watts 2007), as there is always the danger of ostracising a certain group while ridiculing it (Sorensen 2008, 170). In the past few years, several scholars have examined the role of humour in various types of resistance movements. Sorensen (2008), for instance, has studied the Serbian *Otpor* movement and concluded that the movement had used humour as a ‘strategy for non-violent resistance.’ According to Sorensen (Ibid., 180), humour has a three-pronged impact during times of upheaval: ‘(1) it provokes, mocks, or ridicules, which escalates the conflict and puts pressure on the oppressor, (2) it reduces the fear within the resistance movement, (3) humour reduces the oppressors’ options for reacting.’ Mersal, on the other hand, by examining the use of humour in Egypt during the 2011 uprisings, has argued that humour had the capability ‘to present a

---

Figure 9.3: Graffiti as a Note Attached to a Column

Figure 9.4: Graffiti as a Note Attached to a Car
new sense of community and solidarity, providing a means of connecting’ (Mersal 2011). Hassan (2013) attributed a similar role to humour during both Occupy Wall Street protests and the protests in Egypt in 2011, arguing that humour provided superiority and a relief to the resistance. As a result, when combined with humour, taking a cue from Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where he argues that making jokes is a way to revolt and question authority and power, graffiti have been argued to have the role of resistance (Stein 1989). Overall, both the act of writing graffiti and humour, or the combination of both, is related to the act of resisting authority. Yet, Klumbyte (2011) has argued that there is a limit to the role of humour being considered as resistance to authority. By examining the cartoons that were published in Lithuania in the late 1980s, she concluded that these cartoons and thus humour were officially sanctioned and thus counted ‘neither as a resistance nor for a support for the regime.’

The Graffiti in Gezi Park: Humour or Resistance, or Humour as Resistance?

The literature briefly summarised above works mostly with the assumption that equates humour with resistance. However, without a proper audience/reception study, it is difficult to come to that conclusion and we are just left with assumptions. But, as an observer who photographed these graffiti around Gezi Park in the Taksim area, I can safely conclude that the graffiti, regardless of whether or not they contained humour, had three common threads. First, they challenged, or at least tried to challenge, the authority and the current neoliberal order by ridiculing it and making a mockery of it, and delivered messages to the government. Second, the graffiti strongly aired demands from and advice to the government. Third, they marked the presence of different segments of society and praised the ‘resistance.’ This paper, for the purposes of brevity and manageability, will concentrate on the first thread.

The graffiti collected are a mixture of texts and visuals and, due to space restriction, only a selection of them is presented in this chapter. As stated above, just like most humour, humour in the Gezi Park graffiti was a consequence of contradiction, exaggeration, metaphor and incongruity, but the Gezi Park graffiti also contained lots of intertextual references. These intertextual references emerged as a result of what might be called ‘iconic’ statements made by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and various other cabinet members, or their relatives. So below is a selection of
the most typical graffiti. Most of them are in Turkish and, unfortunately, as a result, some might be difficult to render into English. As mentioned above, I left out the graffiti that contained slurs, foul language and sexually explicit material.

Delivering Messages through Humour

The graffiti collected in June 2013 show that several authority figures were the target of graffiti writers: Prime Minister Erdoğan, the AKP, the government, the police, the state and the media. There were also graffiti protesting the current neoliberal order and the government’s intense neoliberalisation, but when looking at the totality of the graffiti pictures, these were smaller in number. Among all these authority figures or positions, Prime Minister Erdoğan-related graffiti were the most frequently encountered and also came in a variety of formats. Obviously some of these contained insults and resignation demands, but humorous Erdoğan graffiti which will be presented in this chapter showed up in several different ways. The first way involved Erdoğan’s first name being twisted. Second was what might be called ‘counter statement graffiti’ or ‘intertextual graffiti,’ made to challenge or to answer the Prime

Figure 9.5: ‘Gayyip’
Minister’s, or other government members’ or their relatives’ symbolic and well known verbal, ‘iconic’ outbursts before and during the Gezi Park protests.

**Erdoğan in Graffiti**

The rehashing of Prime Minister Erdoğan’s name came in several different formats. First, his middle name, Tayyip, was (deliberately) misspelled. For example, ‘Tayip’ instead of ‘Tayyip,’ with one ‘y’ missing. Tayyip was also
spelled in different forms, such as ‘Tayyoş,’ ‘Teyip,’ ‘Tayyo’ or ‘Tayit’ and Gayyip – sounding quite similar to the word ‘lost’ (kayıp in Turkish), most likely a reference to Erdoğan’s Morocco trip and to his absence as the Gezi events were initially unfolding.

Second, it was not only the prime minister’s middle name that was the subject of rehashing; indeed, his whole name, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was deliberately misspelled to be related to events at Gezi Park. For example, Erdoğan’s full name was respelled to become ‘Recop Tayzik Gazdoğan’ (a rough translation into English would be ‘Recop Pressure Gazdoğan’). This connected it to the excessive use of police force – ‘cops’ and tear gas – during the Gezi Park protests. Other forms, such as ‘Redop Tazzik Etboğan’ and ‘Ricip Teyyib İrdöğen,’ also appeared.

Graffiti linking Erdoğan to troubled, authoritarian or not-so-liked leaders or to fallen political figures in the Middle East were also common. Erdoğan
was compared and contrasted to leaders such as Bashar Al-Assad of Syria, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Benjamin Netanyahu and the infamous Chemical Weapons Chief of Saddam Hussein – Chemical Ali –, an obvious interlinking of the government and the excessive use of tear gas during the protests.

While one graffiti, for example, said ‘Sonun Müberek Olsun’ (‘May your end be like Mubarak’s’), another one said ‘Şu işe bak ya, Esad’dan Önce Sen
Figure 9.11: 'Benjamin Netanyahu vs. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'

Figure 9.12: 'Chemical Tayyip'
Yıkıldın, Oh Olsun’ (‘You Were Toppled Before Assad’). Assad was also used as a prefix ‘Esed’ in front of the Prime Minister’s first name.

Erdoğan was likened to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The graffiti shown in Figure 9.11 says ‘Benyamin Tayyip Neden Yahu’ (‘Benjamin Tayyip, but Why Dear God?’), as a result of linguistic plays that replace Netanyahu with ‘Neden Yahu’ (‘But Why Dear God?’). The visual graffiti that likened the prime minister to Chemical Ali of Iraq called him ‘Kimyasal Tayyip’ and this visual was accompanied by penguins and portrait pictures of the prime minister with a ‘wanted’ caption.

Counterstatement or Intertextual Graffiti

The second type of graffiti can be grouped as the ‘counter-statement’ or ‘intertextual’ graffiti where humorous graffiti were written as counter-statements of sorts against various verbal outbursts or what might be called the ‘iconic’ statements of Erdoğan, various cabinet members and also relatives of the cabinet members prior to and during the Gezi Park events. Among this type of graffiti, the most well-known may be the graffiti that were produced in response to the prime minister’s outbursts such as ‘Anani da al git’ (‘Take your mother and go’). The prime minister pronounced these words in 2006, during a visit to Mersin, where a farmer criticised the government’s agricultural policy, stating that ‘the decreasing and delayed payments in government subsidies made their mother cry’ – an expression in Turkish that means that the government policies made the farmers suffer. Erdoğan’s iconic response to the criticism was ‘take your mother and go,’ while the prime minister’s bodyguards immediately removed the farmer from the scene. Figures 9.13, 9.14 and 9.15 show a series of tongue-in-cheek graffiti that can be regarded as a reaction to Erdoğan’s treatment of the farmer: ‘anamı da aldım geldim’ (‘I brought my mother too’), ‘anan da bugün barikattaydı’ (‘your mother was at the barricade today too’), ‘anasi da biberli severdi’ (‘his/her mother liked it with pepper as well’) – a reference that combined Erdoğan’s outbursts with the excessive use of tear and pepper gas during the protests.

In a similar manner, just before the Gezi Park protests and as the Law Regulating the Sale of Liquor and Tobacco was being initiated, Erdoğan infamously said that ayran (a yoghurt drink) not raki (an alcoholic drink)
Figure 9.13: ‘I Brought my Mother Too’

Figure 9.14: ‘Mother Liked it with Pepper as Well’
was the ‘national beverage.’ The protestors responded to this outburst with graffiti that declared: ‘milli içeceğimiz biber gazı’ (‘pepper gas is our national beverage’), ‘o son birayı yasaklamayacaktın’ (‘you should not have banned that last beer’), ‘bu ayran bir harika adamım’ (‘this ayran is fantastic, my man’), highlighting their disagreement regarding the national beverage in a humorous way.
Figure 9.17: ‘You Should Not Have Banned that Last Beer.’

Figure 9.18: ‘This Ayran is Fantastic my Man.’
Figure 9.19: ‘You Gather One Million, We Are One Anyway.’

Figure 9.20: ‘So Tayyo, Those Who Did Not Take Sides Pushed You to the Sidelines.’

Figure 9.21: ‘How about Three More (Kids) Like Us.’
Another remarkable outburst by Erdoğan took place just before the September 2010 referendum. Criticising the members of TÜSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association, Türk Sanayicileri ve İşadamları Derneği) and urging them to take a side in the upcoming referendum, Erdoğan declared ‘taraf olmayan, bertaraf olur’ (roughly translated as ‘those who do not take sides will be pushed to the sidelines’). This ‘iconic’ statement had repercussions during the Gezi Park events and was translated into a graffiti that said ‘ya Tayyo tarafı olanlar, bertaraf etti (Takdir-i İlahi)’ (‘so Tayyo, those who did not take sides, pushed you to the sidelines – God’s Judgement’). The prime minister’s insistence, uttered frequently and at different times, that Turkish people should have ‘three kids’ and not less, became a graffiti: ‘bizim gibi 3 taneye daha ne dersin?’ (‘How about three more kids like us?’). Similarly, Erdoğan’s statement during Gezi Park events that, if he wanted to do so, he too could give the orders to gather his own

---

supporters and that he was barely able to hold the 50 per cent that had voted for him at home was translated into a graffiti that said ‘sen bir milyon topla biz biriz’ (‘You gather one million people, we are one’).

The slogan of the national anti-smoking campaign ‘dumansız hava sahastı’ (‘smoke-free air space’), on the other hand, was also turned into a sticker graffiti glued to a signpost near Taksim Square that said ‘Tayyipsız hava sahastı’ (‘Tayyip-free air space’).

Obviously, in more than eleven years of tenure, Erdoğan was not the only cabinet member making these iconic statements. One such other statement belonged to Ahsen Unakıtan, Minister Kemal Unakıtan’s wife, who, during an interview in 2009 ‘confessed’ that she had asked God where they should have her husband’s heart surgery and God advised them to have it in Cleveland, in the US – of course at the expense of Turkish taxpayers. This dream of hers was reported by the media as ‘Rabbim Cleveland dedi’ (‘God said Cleveland’) and was translated into graffiti as ‘Rabbime sordum diren Gezi dedi’ (‘I asked God and he said “resist Gezi”’) and ‘Rabbime sordum direniş dedi’ (‘I asked God and he said “resistance”’) by the protestors.

Prime Minister Erdoğan and other members of the cabinet were not the only targets of humorous graffiti. The ruling AKP was also targeted. The protests were made through the party’s insignia: the light bulb. ‘Edison bin pişman’ (‘Edison [the inventor of the light bulb] severely regrets it’, i.e. inventing the light bulb), ‘Luzümsüzdu söndürdük’ (‘It was useless, so we turned it off’), ‘Ampül Patladı’ (‘The bulb has blown up’) were three of the graffiti that this author discovered around Gezi Park.

The graffiti writers were also extremely critical of the police for excessive use of force and gas. This was obvious in several different types of graffiti in varying degrees that contained slurs and humour – the humour displaying itself in several different ways. Great inspiration was found in the Grand Auto Theft video game and, consequently, a command from this game ‘Sis Atma’ (‘Don’t Throw Fog’) was frequently seen on the walls. Linguistic plays were very common in the rest of the graffiti describing the excessive use of police of force. For example, there were several graffiti that called the riot police (Çevik Kuvvet in Turkish – which can roughly be translated into English as ‘fast force’) ‘çevik köpek’ (‘fast dog’). Another graffiti tried to

---


Figure 9.23: ‘I asked God. He Said “Resist Gezi.”’

Figure 9.24: ‘I asked God. He Said “Resistance.”’
Figure 9.25: ‘Edison Is Regretful.’

Figure 9.26: ‘It was Useless, So We Turned it off.’

Figure 9.27: ‘The Bulb Has Blown Up.’
highlight the excessive use of police force with Constantinople – ‘ConstantinoPOLIS?’ – using Istanbul’s Byzantine era name, but writing the ‘POLIS’ (‘police’) part of the word in capital letters.

The extreme use of gas by the security forces during the protests, on the other hand, was treated as if it had not/would not hurt anyone. There were graffiti linking the biological breaking of wind to the extreme use of tear gas: ‘osurmayın!!! Bibergazı bağımlılar’ (‘don’t fart!!! Gas addicts’), ‘gazdan korksak osurma兹dık’ (‘if we were afraid of gas, we would not fart’).
Figure 9.30: ‘If We Were Afraid of Gas, We Would Not Fart’

Figure 9.31: ‘Do Not Fart!!! Tear Gas Addicts’
Figure 9.32: ‘Police(men) You Are Making me Cry’

Figure 9.33: ‘There Is No Need for Pepper Spray’. ‘Tayyip, You Are Afraid, Aren’t You.’
Additionally, the graffiti writers wanted to remind the police that the protesters were ‘simply good guys and that the police should not be using tear gas,’ expressing this as graffiti that said ‘polis gözümü yaşartıyorsun’ (‘Police you are making me cry’) and ‘Biber gazına gerek yok, biz duygusal çocuklarız’ (‘There is no need for pepper gas, we are emotional guys’).

The French Queen, Marie Antoinette, was the inspiration for another graffiti shown in Figure 9.34, which said: ‘If they can’t find bread, let them eat gas’ – ‘Recep Tayyip Antoinette,’ making it yet another tongue-in-cheek reference to the excessive use of tear gas during the Gezi Park protests.

Interestingly, graffiti challenging the neoliberal order and corruption did exist, but were not seen as frequently as graffiti on the authoritarian manners of the government, state and the police. The graffiti drawn on the ATM machines of a state bank included statements that accused the AKP and the prime minister of being thieves and asking the AKP to resign. The picture shown in Figure 9.36 says ‘Sermaye Tayyos’ (‘Capitalist Tayyos’), not only targeting the prime minister by using a diminutive after his name, but also calling him a capitalist – directly criticising the neoliberal policies of the AKP. The protestors frequently brought up the fact that a shopping centre would be built in lieu of Gezi Park. The protestors also ‘wished’ that

![Figure 9.34: ‘If They Can’t Find Bread, Let Them Eat Gas – Recep Tayyip Antoinette.’](image)
‘AKP yıkılsun yerine AVM yapılsın’ (‘Demolish the AKP and build a shopping centre instead’) or ‘AVM’yi Al Git’ (‘Take the Shopping Centre and Go’), an intertextual reference to Erdoğan’s ‘take your mother and go’ statement delivered in Mersin.
The media got their fair share of criticism through graffiti. Because of the blackout exercised by the mainstream media during the protests, they were regarded as collaborators. The graffiti contained the usual slurs, but also, as neatly put in several of the graffiti, media were described as ‘satılmış medya’, i.e. totally bought out by the government. The graffiti also called the
media ‘yandás’ (‘one who takes sides’) and ‘korkak’ (‘coward’). Interestingly, as far as the media-related graffiti collected for this research are concerned, they contained almost no humour – possibly, an interesting analogy that underlines the fact that the protestors could not find anything humorous about the sorry state of the self-censored media, especially during the Gezi Park events. The only humour that existed were penguin visual graffiti, as seen in Figure 9.12, scattered here and there, in reference to one of the TV channels that preferred to show a documentary on penguins while the Gezi Park protests were taking place.

Conclusion

The Gezi Park protests were regarded as one of the most out of the ordinary upheavals challenging the state, the government and authority in recent Turkish history. Challenging any authority is a matter of crossing a certain fear threshold. Overall, the two graffiti pictures ‘Tayyip Korkuyorsun Değil mi?’ (‘Tayyip You Are Afraid, Aren’t You?’) and ‘Korku İmparatorluğu Yıkıldı’ (‘The Empire of Fear Has Collapsed’) in Figures 9.39 and 9.40 below neatly summarise not only the Gezi Park protests but also the graffiti that emerged during the protests.

This chapter has tried to draw attention to a lesser-analysed aspect of the Gezi Park events – the humorous graffiti. While the sheer act of writing graffiti is a challenge to the authority, writing humorous graffiti multiplies the effect of this challenge, as humour is an act of challenge in and of itself. In addition to challenging the authority and the order, Gezi Park graffiti also had the mission of delivering a message to authorities. Obviously, the graffiti presented here is a short selection of the numerous graffiti collected in and around Gezi Park on different days in June 2013.

Yet, although these messages were delivered through humour and through graffiti, they were crystal clear. The protestors were unhappy with the policies and the attitudes of the AKP government, and especially with the ways in which Prime Minister Erdoğan formulated them. Overall, the Gezi Park events were not just a reaction against the municipality’s decision to turn Gezi Park into a shopping centre and a residential complex in the form of an old Ottoman military barracks. They were primarily against the paternalistic ‘I know what is best for you’ attitude and the outbursts of mostly Erdoğan and his cabinet members before and during the Gezi Park events. That being said, in the final analysis, the chapter calls for a more systematic analysis of graffiti popping up around the cities in Turkey. As the
Figure 9.39: ‘Tayyip, You Are Afraid, Aren’t You?’

Figure 9.40: ‘The Empire of Fear Has Collapsed.’
Figure 9.41: ‘Berkin Elvan Is Immortal.’ ‘The Oligarchical State Will Surely Collapse.’

Figure 9.42: ‘Reset the Money, Bilal.’
ways and the means of ordinary people to voice their criticism are becoming limited (i.e. recent Twitter and Youtube bans), the walls might be the way out to voice their opinion. The final set of graffiti, pictured in Figures 9.41 and 9.42, refers to Gezi Park9 and the 17 December 2013 Operation.10 The pictures, taken in Istanbul in the spring of 2014, ‘Berkin Elvan Ölümsüzdür’ (‘Berkin Elvan is Immortal’) and ‘Paraları Sıfırla Bilal’ (‘Reset the Money Bilal’), might herald the fact that it is about time that we start considering the walls a unit of analysis in performative dissent.

Bibliography


9 The police shot Berkin Elvan with a tear gas canister in June 2013 during the Gezi Park protests, near his home in Okmeydani, Istanbul. He died in March 2014 after months in a coma. The state, so far, has been reluctant to find the police officer responsible for his murder.

10 The 17 December Operation was launched in 2013 revealing the alleged corrupt ties between members of the government and several different businessmen. The Operation was followed by wiretaps allegedly belonging to the prime minister and his family detailing these ties being leaked on Youtube. ‘Paraları sıfırla Bilal’ was the order allegedly given by Prime Minister Erdoğan to his son Bilal to remove all the money that they had at his home.


Watts, Jacqueline. 2007. ‘Can’t Take a Joke? Humour as Resistance, Refuge and Exclusion in a Highly Gendered Workplace.’ *Feminism & Psychology* 17:259-266.