Where did Gezi Come from?

Exploring the Links between Youth Political Activism before and during the Gezi Protests

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Introduction

Turkey's younger generation had long been portrayed as ‘apolitical’ in the literature. One nationally representative survey conducted in 2007 concluded that only 9 per cent of young people were concerned with politics (Kılıç 2009, 31-68). Another study indicated the share of young people who were members of political parties remained around 10 per cent between 1999 and 2008 (Erdoğan 2009, 71-96). Given the low rate of membership of political parties and self-reported interest in politics among young people, academics searched for the reasons why younger Turkish generations have been ‘apolitical.’ One study suggested that young people are unwilling to spend their time and energy on making Turkey a better place, as they do not trust institutions and are not optimistic about their future (ARI, Düşünce ve Toplumsal Gelişim Derneği 2001, 6). An alternative account argued that young people do not participate in politics mainly due to the economic insecurities they face and the legacy of military juntas (Çarkoğlu 2013).

The notion of ‘apolitical youth’ has been widely discussed today in various contexts and geographies, especially by researchers within the field of youth studies. Young people’s disinterest in politics mostly refers to their unwillingness to participate in conventional political organisations; namely, the political parties and other mechanisms of parliamentary politics. Recent research conducted on youth participation in Turkey indicates that only 9 per cent of young people are members of, or actively engage in the activities of political parties. While the research proves young people’s disinterest in conventional politics, it questioned the assumed link between aversion from participating in the conventional political system and being apolitical (KONDA 2014). Focusing on the post-1980 generation in Turkey, Lüküslü (2013) went beyond the dichotomy of interest/disinterest and depoliticised youth stigmatisation and proposed the notion of ‘necessary conformism’ as a life strategy of young people, revealing the underlying discontent and a hidden agony. The need for ethnographic studies on youth in Turkey has been pointed out previously as an important step to understanding the
ways young people express themselves and their cultural, religious, class and ethnic positions as the subjects of their lives (Neyzi 2001).

Against this background, the spark of Gezi protests came as a surprise, not only to the government, but also to most social scientists working on youth and politics. Previously portrayed as an apathetic generation, young people massively participated in the Gezi protests, especially in the metropolitan cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. While this unexpected participation can be understood merely as a spontaneous outburst, we argue that this fails to explain the resilience of the protests for more than two weeks under pressure from police violence or the new political actors that became symbols of the Gezi protests, such as LGBTI rights groups, ecological groups,1 football fans and feminists.

Here are two questions that we think are important to answer in order to understand youth political activism in the Gezi protests: How could young people, who were portrayed as ‘apolitical,’ organise such protest movement? How is it possible that LGBTI rights groups, ecological groups, football fans and feminists, who were considered negligible groups before, became the symbolic groups of the Gezi protests? In order to explore its origins and its peculiarities, we argue that we have to study the history of different youth activist groups and explore how they have contributed to the Gezi protests.

**Social Movement Communities and Social Movement Spillover**

Resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald 1977) has long been the dominant approach in the study of social movements. This approach centralised ‘the interaction between resource availability, the pre-existing organisation of preference structures, and entrepreneurial attempts (of social movements) to meet preference demand (of its constituency)’ (Ibid., 1236). While this approach helps us to examine the competition between different social movements, it fails to investigate ‘how different social movements affect one another’ (Meyer and Whittier 1994, 277). Alternatively, Meyer and Whittier (Ibid., 278) demonstrated in a case study that the women’s movement had a significant impact on the ideological frames, tactics, leadership and organisational structure of the nuclear freeze movement in the early 1980s in the US. Unless the impact of the women’s movement is acknowledged,

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1 The activists we interviewed described themselves as ‘ecologists’ instead of ‘environmentalists,’ whom they criticise for pursuing mere reformist solutions that can hardly solve structural ecological problems. Hence, our usage of the term ‘ecologists’ throughout our chapter.
full account of the nuclear freeze movement cannot be understood. The authors argued that the nuclear freeze movement inherited the women's movement's emphasis upon the politics of process that defies hierarchical decision-making structures in favour of consensus decision-making methods (Ibid., 289).

The concept of social movement communities is useful in understanding the impact of LGBTI rights groups, ecological groups, football fans and feminists on the Gezi protests. Staggenborg (1998, 199) suggested that the origins of collective action cannot be explained merely on the basis of calculation about political opportunities. She added, ‘While some participants notice political opportunities, others are encouraged to act collectively by the culture and solidarity of the movement community.’ Here, we argue that LGBTI rights groups, ecological groups, football fans and feminists have been successfully linking members of other political groups, which normally would not come together easily (i.e. Kemalists, socialists, members of the Kurdish movement and Anti-capitalist Muslims). In other words, discursive and practical strategies they employed long before the Gezi protests contributed to the consolidation of a social movement community.

In addition, Meyer and Whittier (1994, 282) coin the concept of ‘social movement spillover’ to explain the fact that ‘one movement can influence subsequent movements both from outside and from within: by altering the political and cultural conditions it confronts in the external environment, and by changing the individuals, groups and norms within the movement itself.’ This concept might be useful in understanding how social movements preceding Gezi protests could transfer their ways of organising, producing a political discourse and creating as well as sustaining solidarity networks into the larger protest movements like Gezi.

New Social Movements in Turkey

The emergence of new social movements in Turkey was possible during the 1990s after the severe political oppression resulting from the 1980 coup had started to dissolve. Following the process through which traditional left organisations significantly lost their impact on society, new social movements such as feminism, the ecological movement, LGBTI activism, ethnic or religious rights activism have become important lines of expression and opposition for people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Research indicated that one could speak of continuity between traditional left organisations and new social movements in terms of their organisational
cultures, goals and aims in Turkey (Coşkun 2006). Even if their concerns might seem different from one another, new social movements in Turkey still carry important characteristics of the political legacy upon which they have been built.

Regarding the two major theories employed in analysing new social movements within the social sciences literature – resource mobilisation theory and new social movements theory –, Şimşek (2004) argues that new social movements in Turkey could be better understood through the lenses of the latter. While resource mobilisation theory offers insight into the rational choices of the movements and resources they make use of in order to achieve their goals, the new social movements theory is guided by cultural analysis focusing on cultural norms, symbols and forms of authority as well as the self-reflexive practices of movements. Underlining the main characteristic of the Turkish nation state-building process as increasing pressure on cultural, ethnic and language based diversity within the society, it is argued that new social movements in Turkey have been mostly built on grievances resulting from this process. The rapid urbanisation process and new social complexity that this process created accelerated the strengthening of new social movements in the Turkish political scene.

The most important tool that the new social movements theory provides us with is the emphasis on the ways that people in these movements participate in politics. Bringing the cultural perspective back into the analysis, this theory invites us to focus more on how participants perceive politics, experience political processes and organise accordingly. In this sense, alternative anti-hierarchical ways of doing politics, close friendship and solidarity links within the groups, and new tools such as creative activities and art practices also become important contours of investigation in analysing politics. Following these insights, we think the Gezi protests stand as a substantial field of research in terms of discussing how the notions of political and organisation styles, ways of cooperation and protest skills, which the new social movements have been developing since the 1990s, have been effective in shaping the content and the form of a greater protest movement.

Methodology

This article is based on the qualitative data collected within two separate field researches conducted before and after the Gezi protests in 2009² and

² Focus group discussions conducted by Demet Lüküslü and Volkan Yılmaz.
in 2013, respectively. The initial field research is composed of focus group discussions with young people (aged between 18 and 25) who are engaged in the activities of new social movements in Istanbul (feminists, ecological activists, LGBTI activists, etc.) (Boyraz 2010). The second part of the data was collected through in-depth interviews with young people (aged 18-25) who participated in the Gezi protests in Istanbul and who are also members of new social movements.

These two separate field researches were not originally designed to provide a basis for a comparative historical analysis nor do they form two parts of a single longitudinal study. However, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews had a common focus on young people’s notions of the political, their experiences in political activism and protest. Therefore, combining these two separately collected data gave us the opportunity to follow the continuities concerning the ways young people relate themselves to politics and political activism before and after the Gezi protests. Since both of the fieldworks included young people who actively participated in new social movements, reading these two data together might provide a reliable basis for exploring the links between youth political activism in new social movements and youth political activism throughout the Gezi protests.

Our data analysis will be presented under five cross-cutting themes: 1) aversive attitude towards conventional political organisations; 2) ability to organise horizontally and to accommodate individual differences; 3) ability to work with diverse political groups and cooperate with strangers; 4) ability to transfer protest skills; 5) the Gezi protests as a paradigm-shifting event with respect to the older generation’s perception of the relationship between youth and politics.

Five Cross-cutting Themes

Aversive Attitude towards Conventional Political Organisations

The data we have collected before and after the Gezi protests reveals that aversion to conventional political organisations is still a significant tendency within young people.

A feminist activist described her perception of conventional politics by using the concept of hegemony. As she could not position herself within any
kind of hegemonic project and she was pessimistic about the possibility of a hegemony-free political organisation, she did not consider herself actively participating within the existing political structure:

For me, being in a political party in this political atmosphere means being a part of that hegemony from the start. It seems to me that another political system (my knowledge of politics is limited but) is not possible. (2009)

One of our respondents expressed his hesitation with respect to the restrictive atmosphere of conventional politics, to which one has to conform:

Politicisation, I do not consider myself politicised because I think in order to be politicised I have to be part of an organisational culture, I have to be a part of a political organisation, but it is not easy to be part of political organisations or acquire political consciousness, because this is a very rigid thing and I think you have to fit in these patterns and, as they say, you have to devote your life to it. You really have to be like that. That’s why I think it is really hard to be politicised. (LGBTI activist, 2013)

On-going disinterest in conventional politics among young activists reinforces for us a need to think about the assumed direct relationship between being distant from conventional politics and being apolitical. Interest in political problems and public matters does not go hand in hand with interest and willingness to participate in conventional politics. However, continued aversion to conventional political organisations still deserves further discussion in order to understand the alternative values and notions of young people who are activists.

Ability to Organise Horizontally and to Accommodate Individual Differences

A second cross-cutting theme revealed by our analysis of youth activists’ narratives before and after the Gezi protests is youth activists’ criticism of hierarchical political organisations.

One of our respondents interviewed before the Gezi protests told us that the main features of political organisations that she took part in are:

Non hierarchical, open to sharing experiences, open to new innovations, where there is a process of learning from each other. No one is at the bottom or top, everyone learns from each other through their differences.
Empowers. The process of creating a solidarity network is so important. You can apply this to everything. (Feminist activist, 2009)

As the narrative suggests, she created a dichotomy between hierarchical and horizontal political organisations. Hierarchical political organisations here refer mainly to conventional political organisations such as political parties, trades unions and professional organisations. As a feminist activist, she underlined that hierarchical organisational structures do not empower their members. In her view, by contrast, the feminist organisation she took part in allowed its members to get to know each other, create together and support each other; all of which leads to empowerment.

A similar criticism of hierarchical political organisations, which has been popularised through feminist initiatives since the early 1980s, could be found in Gezi protestors’ narratives. For instance, one of our respondents who identified himself as an independent activist suggested:

Now, to feel responsible, to voice your concerns and talk about these things with your family and loved ones, I do these things, but I am not becoming a member of something, I have not been one and I am not thinking of doing it [...] In these groups, I feel like all those internal rules or internal administration, all relationships within these groups, all their principles and all their thoughts will not be in accordance with mine. (2013)

As the quote above suggests, while this young person participated in the Gezi protests, he was still not in favour of becoming a member of a political organisation. His main reason was that he would not feel comfortable with the internal rules that had been set prior to his participation. In other words, it could be argued that his perception of political organisations is that they are rigid structures that do not allow room for dissenting views within the group. Therefore, he preferred to voice his concerns and talk about politics with his family members and loved ones. His aversion to hierarchical political organisations does not imply that he does not feel any political responsibility.

**Ability to Work with Diverse Political Groups and Cooperate with Strangers**

The third cross-cutting theme in the interviews conducted with youth activists before and after the Gezi protests is that young activists are open to forms of political activism that bring together diverse political groups.
One of our respondents from the LGBTI rights movement told us that:

Many people in this organisation learn about the problems that a Kurdish, a disabled, a trans-woman face, the problems that are experienced by people who are not like me. I think this is incredible. (2009)

As the quote implies, this young activist was enthusiastic about the opportunities of learning about other people's concerns provided by his organisation. While political organisations that are considered part of new social movements have been generally criticised for pursuing a 'narcissistic' political agenda that focuses narrowly on the problems of identity groups, this activist told us a different story. It was being an LGBTI rights activist that introduced him to the problems of the Kurdish, disabled and trans-women.

This quote also suggests to us that youth activists' openness to learning about other groups' concerns and political activism that brings together diverse political groups was not an entirely new phenomenon that came into being during the Gezi protests. Many groups, including but not limited to ecologists, feminists and LGBTI activists, had already been spending time learning about other groups' agendas and trying to find ways to integrate diverse concerns into a common political agenda.

Another novelty that has been attributed to the Gezi protests was the practice of political activism that brought together not only different identity groups, but also people of different social classes. Our interviews with youth activists before Gezi suggest that this was also not unique to Gezi, but existed within football fan groups long before. For instance, one of our respondents, a member of a football fan club, told us:

There it rains, and you all get wet, police attacks, and all of you get beaten, all of you get subjected to tear gas, there are many people who are from upper classes and lower classes, you experience it together. (2009)

As our respondent suggests, football fans consisting of people from different social classes had already been gaining a common experience of police violence.

This quotation also shows us that football fan groups had already met with tear gas long before the Gezi protests. Without doubt, the Gezi events increased the visibility of the police use of tear gas against the public. But the football fan groups' former experience with this issue might have facilitated the transfer of know-how in terms of dealing with tear gas from these groups to other protestors.
While we have argued that youth activists’ knowledge of other groups’ concerns and political activism that brought together diverse political groups emerged long before the spark of Gezi, interviews conducted with youth activists who participated in the Gezi protests indicate that this trend gained a new momentum during the demonstrations. An ecological activist told us:

For example, we have a student club called ‘Lubunya’ in the university; that is the club for lesbians, gays and bisexuals; I didn’t know them before. However, I saw these people there (in the park), they came and put their tents in an orderly way, we had a chat. Specifically I have some friends from my department in this club, my communication with them got better; that is to say I had the chance to get to know these people. Most probably, if we did not have Gezi, I would not have known these people. (2013)

The quotation above is especially telling: it suggests that the Gezi protests enabled different groups to interact with one another. Despite the fact that the LGBTI activists our interviewee refers to are students at the same university he is enrolled in, they had not interacted with one another before the Gezi protests. However, the political atmosphere in Gezi Park facilitated that interaction. This might have created a sense of solidarity between these young people and between the political groups they belong to.

**Ability to Transfer Protest Skills**

Solidarity in times of protest and cooperation among strangers was not exactly a new experience for the young people who were already engaged in social movements before Gezi. An ecological activist narrated how ‘protest friendships’ developed before the Gezi protests:

For example, one of my friends only calls me to ask ‘where are you?’ I tell her that ‘I am there.’ Then she responds, ‘I called you as I thought you were participating in the protest in Kadıköy.’ Some of my friends only call me when there is a protest on that day. (2009)

Moreover, young people shared previously gained protest skills with others during the Gezi protests. One of our respondents gave the example of preparing water solutions with Talcid as an antidote to tear gas:
These people did not suddenly discover the water with Talcid. This was what we had used in the protests. We had prepared a five-litre gallon for the 1 May march the previous year. It would have been really hard for the group to learn from scratch if there was no prior know-how. (LGBTI activist, 2013)

Therefore, we argue that there is continuity before and after the Gezi protests concerning the development of solidarity ties between young people. However, the variety of solidarity practices experienced throughout the Gezi protests seems to have a significant impact on how young people perceive the importance of solidarity in fighting together for their values and demands. Different oppositional groups who had not previously struggled together for a unified purpose got to know each other throughout the protests.

The Gezi Protests as a Paradigm-Shifting Event with Respect to the Older Generation’s Perception of the Relationship between Youth and Politics

Various studies argued that the older generations in Turkey who had witnessed the military coups d’état do not take contemporary youth political activism seriously, especially those taking place alongside the new social movements. In the eyes of the older generations, young people in Turkey are disinterested in politics, ignorant about political developments and have been co-opted by a consumerist and individualistic global culture.

One of our 2009 respondents explained how he experienced the gerontological structure of politics:

On the one hand, OK, in a place where religion, etc. is not really taken seriously, you can wear whatever you want, you can go to clubs, you can go out at night, you are told that ‘you are young, do whatever you want to do;’ I think we are still subjected to age hierarchy when we talk about politics. I think we are – as children of the 1980s – unfortunate, because we could not see those hard years; so, people think we are not mature enough and something is beyond our ken. (LGBTI activist)

As the quote suggests, our interviewee did not feel that his political opinions were valued. While his parents were not restrictive with respect to his everyday lifestyle, they did not take his political opinions seriously. He thought the main reason for this was that he belongs to the 1980s generation, who
did not experience military coups d'état. Therefore, older generations that experienced those events think that they acquired a significant knowledge of politics, which the younger generation lacks. Our interviewee describes this as being unfortunate, as their 'lack' of knowledge and experience disempowers them in politics.

The Gezi protests can be conceptualised as ‘a rite of passage’ for the younger generations in order to be perceived as political ‘enough’ in the eyes of the older generations who witnessed the military coups. Our respondent told us:

These parents have raised their children as too individualistic and career-oriented individuals, and I know many young people feel oppressed because of this [...] That is why I think my generation is under severe pressure. What happened in Gezi was not only against the state but also against family. People from our generation had real difficulty proving themselves; however, Gezi was the event in which these people have proved themselves. (Ecological activist, 22)

As the quote suggests, our respondent noticed that the Gezi protests radically changed the older generations’ perception of young people’s relationship with politics. Given that young activists remained on the streets despite police violence, they ‘proved’ themselves. Our respondent saw this older generation’s paradigm shift with respect to the relationship between young people and politics as emancipation from family. In that respect, young people opened up a discursive space for themselves within politics during the Gezi protests.

Conclusion

Here, we argue that the Gezi protests – as a case event – provide insights about how young people engaged in new social movements contributed to the success of Gezi protests by enabling horizontal organisation with diverse groups, transfer of protest skills and formation of networks of solidarity between strangers. By devoting time and energy to forming social movement communities long before the Gezi protests, and by working to introduce their ways of organising, producing political discourses and forming solidarity networks, we suggest that youth activists in new social movements contributed greatly to the formation of this collective culture of protest and solidarity.
Young people in feminist, ecological, LGBTI movements and football fan groups were active participants in the Gezi protests and, in collaboration with many other groups, they contributed to a historic socio-political protest experience in Turkey. The ability to collaborate and the collectively expressed will also encourage us to think about how new social movements can find innovative ways to influence and change conventional politics, rather than merely employing a cynical rejection strategy. We believe that this historical perspective enriches the analysis of the Gezi protests, as it displays the social movement spillover originating from feminist, ecological, LGBTI movements and football fan groups that gave the Gezi protests their peculiar character.

Lastly, our analysis indicates that being interested in politics does not necessarily mean taking part in conventional political organisations. Academic discourse that portrayed the younger generation as ‘apolitical’ has to be rethought in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. The image of youth we have witnessed in the Gezi protests is one of young people not only interested in but also struggling to influence public matters. This is not unrelated to what was already developing before Gezi in terms of youth political participation in new social movements. In this sense, Gezi was a product of this earlier trend and could not have been possible without this history.

Bibliography


