

A photograph of a person's arms holding a flagpole, with the Turkish flag (red with a white crescent and star) visible in the background. The scene is at night, with city lights blurred in the background.

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Gezi – Anatomy of a Public Square Movement

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ABSTRACT *The Occupy Gezi movement has been a staging ground for the creativity of micro-practices, and it embodies the importance of the politics of everyday life. The claim to protect the park is not merely metaphorical. The park signifies the physicality of the public sphere. Ideally it is the concrete space, open space for citizens where they can manifest freely their presence and interact with each other. The public square Gezi movement represents a new threshold for democracy where old cleavages between authoritarian secularism and Islam are surpassed and new forms of citizenship are rehearsed. The Gezi Park movement opened up a new arena of creative experience and provided a home for democratic imaginaires growing and resonating from Istanbul, Turkey.*

*“Yaşamak bir ağaç gibi tek ve hür ve bir orman gibi kardeşçesine”
“To live like a tree alone and free and like a forest in brotherhood”*

Nazım Hikmet

The Occupy Gezi movement has been a staging ground for the creativity of micro-practices, and it embodies the importance of the politics of everyday life. As a public square movement, it opened up a new arena of experience and democratic opportunities growing and resonating from Istanbul, Turkey.

The Occupation of Gezi Park started on May 28, 2013, in protest against the implementation of an urban management project. When the police brutally intervened and used aggressive

force, the Gezi movement gained new momentum from the massive support of the middle class and the expansion from Istanbul to other urban cities. The public has not hesitated to take to the streets and block avenues, neighborhoods, and their city’s central spaces. Others participate from their balconies, with whole families chiming in to the protestors’ chorus, banging on pots and pans. They have found pacifistic means of protest that require no arms or political slogans to express their discontent and frustrations with the AK Party govern-

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ment. This urban movement, started by young people, supported by the middle class, and featuring a strong female presence, has not weakened in the face of impressive displays of force by riot police who use tear gas without hesitation. Clouds of gas filled the sky in city centers, making breathing difficult; but these clouds, symbols of pollution and the abuse of power, have only bolstered the anger of ordinary citizens.

The Gezi movement marked a new threshold for democracy. As every new event unfolded, there is a date, 'before' and 'after' Gezi. The movement in which they have gained a new voice and unifying force happily surprised the participants themselves. The movement created its actors, a repertoire of action of its own, and instigated a new social dynamic that challenges the established political norms.

The Gezi movement has been compared to other social protest movements throughout history. Similarities were drawn to the "May 68" youth protest movement in France. The "Tahrir Square" movement in Egypt and the "Arab Spring" came to mind. But the movements in the capitals of Western cities, such as "Occupy Wall Street" and the "*Les Indignes*," were also given as examples to understand the anti-capitalist stand of the Gezi protest movement.

The Gezi movement is both all of these movements, and none of them. It borrows from them all, and has similarities with each. However, it is

For Istanbul citizens, the project of constructing a shopping mall in the middle of Gezi Park is nothing more than the confiscation of a public space by private capital

also distinct and unique. As in the case of these other movements, Gezi is a demonstration of citizens – an expression of civilian resistance, staged in the streets and occupying local squares. It is a public movement. As in the case of the 1968 movements in France, Gezi distinguishes itself as a youth movement, with its own generational characteristics. However, this was not a case of the younger generation turning against the previous generation. On the contrary – their parents were joining their children and participating in the same protest movement. In Paris, the 68 slogan "*ça suffit*" ("enough is enough") was aimed against Charles De Gaulle for holding power in office for ten years. Similar to the French context, the Gezi protest says "enough" to the last ten years of power held by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan.

For some, who use the Arab Spring as a model, these protests resemble the occupation of Tahrir Square, and demonstrate the population's anger against the authoritarian political regime. However, the political structures are not similar. Turkey is

a parliamentary system, holding free elections since 1946. The Arab Spring was about the dissolution of an authoritarian regime and the demand for democracy, and giving the public – the majority – a voice. The protests in Turkey were the criticism of a democracy of the majority in defence of individual, minority voices. For some, the Gezi movement is similar to European activists who protest against global economic powers. The Turkish debate has similar elements within it, but also more specific ones. European activists, “*les indignes*” (those who were “outraged” and defended their dignity against neo-liberalism) have been themselves threatened by the global economic instability. Turkish protestors were not victims of the financial crisis, but they refused to be the pawns of the hyper-development projects undertaken by the AK Party government.

It is thus necessary to look for the meaning of these protests in their original context. Defending a few trees in Istanbul’s Gezi Park is not merely a pretext for political contestation. The plan to destroy this public park in order to construct a shopping mall has aroused a new critical consciousness. The Gezi occupation movement reflects resistance to the extreme urban development of the past ten years.

Within the Gezi movement, environmental sensitivity and criticism of capitalism became intertwined. In general, capitalism escapes the grip of politics, as it manifests itself through abstract concepts like global forces,

the financial world and neo-conservatism. In Turkey, capitalism has taken a material form, incarnated in the shopping mall, a new and concrete symbol of global financial capitalism. It makes tangible commercial capitalism, a consumerist society, and the global exploitation of labor. The initial enthusiasm for malls as both shopping centers and places to socialize has faded away. Malls have started to ruin the urban fabric in the same way as commercial greed and consumerism. For Istanbul citizens, the project of constructing a shopping mall in the middle of Gezi Park is nothing more than the confiscation of a public space by private capital.

The transformation of the Turkish economy under the AK Party government has been considered a success story. However, it has been also subjected to critiques among left-wing Muslims. They have voiced their critiques of this so-called “pious-capitalism” (capitalists with ablution). The Gezi movement is in line with this critique of hyper-development and anti-capitalism. It expresses a new urban awareness against consumer culture.

The protection of the park is not merely metaphorical. The park signifies the physicality of the public sphere. It is the concrete space, open space for citizens to manifest themselves. The Gezi movement is protecting this public space from the commercialization by the state and the transformation of urban life as merely a way to generate income from rent. The participation of ordinary citizens with

pots and pans shows the demand of the general public to be heard.

The public space was shrinking and being suffocated prior to the Gezi protests.

Restrictions on the freedom of expression and the crackdown on the opposition – particularly journalists who have lost their jobs, and the mass media changing its editorial

particularly due to the moralist rhetoric surrounding it. The latest regulations aim to restrict sales of alcohol and ban all images, advertisements, and movie scenes involving alcohol consumption; this brought together students, merchants, actors, singers, and directors in fear of restrictions on their individual and artistic freedoms.

Fighting the invasion of personal space had been on the agenda of the “anxious moderns” from day one, at times verging on Islamophobia. The “Demonstrations for the Republic” (*Cumhuriyet Mitingleri*) voiced this fear of interference, although they were tainted with hints of sympathy for military interventions. These demonstrations can also be seen as the preliminary signs of the socialization of secularism or descending from the state to the streets. The current movement, on the other hand, is a voluntary civilian resistance movement. We cannot say that it embodies the same exclusive nature of secularism seen under centralised authority. This is a youth movement where secular values are ingrained in their lifestyles.

But the Gezi movement has been a civilian and pluralistic movement. It staged unification in ‘the square.’ The Gezi movement managed to unite people around a tree, against the polarizing rhetoric and politics of the government. People with disparate ideas and lifestyles – young and old, students and bureaucrats, feminists and housewives, Islamists and leftists, Kurds and Alawites, Besiktas fans

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line – have put a muzzle on public discourse. The fact that the Gezi protests were not covered during the most important first few days by the mainstream media was ample proof of this. That is hardly realistic when one considers the myriad TV channels in Turkey.

Moralizing intrusions into the citizen’s way of life have abounded. New decrees and moralizing discourses have aroused the suspicion that government was intending to intervene in secular ways of life and reorganize public life to align with Islamic values. A warning issued to a young couple kissing on a subway in Ankara has triggered anger and criticism. A decree limiting the sale of alcohol has ignited a huge negative reaction,



Protestors visit an impromptu library at Gezi Park.

and Fenerbahçe fans – who would not normally be seen together were united.

In addition to this authoritarian and moralizing drift, it is Erdogan's style and tone of address that have profoundly offended the public. He refers to his opponents by referring to them in a pejorative manner, as "marginal," "thugs," "scum" (*çapulcu*), or even "drunkards" (*ayyaş*). His remarks, initially commended for their sincerity, and occasionally humorous, turned into an offensive, patronizing, and scornful rhetoric. His contemptuous vocabulary is no longer a simple source of mockery in conversations, but has incited collective indignation. He provoked a scandal by naming a new bridge over the Bosphorus Strait after Yavuz Sultan Selim, a name that evokes the atrocities committed against the Alevites. "Respect" has become a new slogan tagged on walls all over the cities, and

it expresses the need for a return to civility in Turkish public life.

For the past few years, the mode of governance has seen the personalization of power, not unlike that of the sultanate. Enjoying a majority rule with no real political opposition, Erdogan has not hesitated to make major decisions himself, without deigning to consult those primarily concerned – the citizens – nor his own political entourage. By monopolizing discourse he has undermined the power of others, such as the mayor of Istanbul, who sought to ease tensions during the demonstrations in Gezi Park. This personalization of power is felt in his omnipresence in the public space, and it is now being turned against him as it crystallizes in anger. He has been left alone as the sole addressee of the protestors in the park. People have felt more and more disempowered about their own lives, environment, and urban spaces.

The Gezi protest reminds us of the importance of manners and civility in the public life. It seems like a paradox that a young and libertarian movement is fighting for concepts like respect and civility, which are traditionally regarded as the monopoly of conservatives. This movement displays a new public culture that is respectful of the other, and careful in the rhetoric of the movement.

This public square movement provides a stage for interaction and performativity. As opposed to political movements, the park is open to improvisation, creativity, and humor. Hence, these young adults have been experiencing a kind of communal life reminiscent of the peaceful gatherings of the 68 counter cultural movement, with music, environmentalism, politics, flowers and beer. They shared their improvised, performed, alternative, peaceful 'Occupy Gezi' culture instantly with the rest of the world through social media – Facebook and Twitter being the new global networks of our time.

The movement has created its own language and repertoire of action. *Ayyaş* and *çapulcu* have acquired new humorous meanings. Individual protestors have claimed these names in reference to themselves and have thus inverted these hurtful, stigmatizing, offensive words into a humorous assertion. *Çapulcu* stands for the common identity of the movement. This playful nature of the movement was brought to the TV screen when the presenter of a game show changed the original meaning of the

word “*çapulcu*” (scum) and redefined it as “a proactive person who puts his money where his mouth is, an activist.” A well-known essayist, leftist intellectual Murat Belge, has criticised the vulgarity of the word “*ayyaş*” and suggested that the word “*akşamcı*” (man of the evening) referred to the tradition of drinking raki and the culture of drinking, and added that the people with a good command of Turkish would distinguish between these nuances.

This movement is doomed to stay as a minority movement in the eyes of some, since it cannot impose sanctions or turn into a political opposition. However, the significance and transformative power of active minorities in democracies should be remembered. Maybe these people are on the stage for a brief moment, but this moment is now etched in the collective memory and engraved on the square's history. It is wrong to view this movement through a political lens. This is a public protest movement. And it can rejuvenate social imaginary and regenerate the fabric of democracy as long as it remains innocent and under the canopy of the trees. The movement may lose its democratic soul if it takes on a political agenda. Its political significance and effectiveness is rooted in its public performativity.

The call for “respect” and the call for “resignation” represent different dynamics. We should not confuse an uprising demanding respect from its leaders with an effort to overthrow a democratically elected government.

The originality of this movement resides in its occupation of the public square, not to be confused with a street movement that defies the rules of democracy.

The Gezi movement brought to our attention the public space as a way of enhancing and staging democracy as part of everyday practices of ordinary citizens. It has shown the public sphere as a vital sphere of democracy, that should be open to everyone, not trapped in state authority or invested with capitalist ventures. However, for the government, it is not the public sphere but the public order that matters. It refuses to give in to a bunch of “marginals” and fringe extremists. Their method of rule, legislation, and over-enthusiasm to discipline their citizens are indications that they have trouble leaving public spaces for the ordinary people. They seem to prefer ballot-box democracy to public-square democracy.

The struggles for democracy can occur across different time zones, and elections, reforms, or demonstrations can take place in different temporalities. Long-term problems and reforms for the democratization of Turkey include: the retreat of the army from the public domain, the initiation of the Kurdish peace process, and the discussion of the taboo of Armenian Genocide. Compared to these fundamental and deeply rooted issues of Turkish democracy, the Gezi Park movement might be dismissed as “minor” politics, a struggle by people for day-to-day issues, aiming to preserve their privileges. Some even blame the

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Gezi movement for hindering and harming the peace process that has just been initiated between the AK Party government and the Kurdish nationalist movement. There are also those who are reluctant for peace, and are adamant that it will only consolidate the AK Party government, not bring about true democracy. The Gezi civil resistance movement has already expanded the limits of our democracy. Hence, as Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a supporter of the peace movement and MP for Istanbul (Peace and Democracy Party) stated, it is inconceivable that the Gezi movement could harm the peace process – the real threat to peace process would come from oppression.

The Gezi movement shows that we are at a new threshold of democracy, in which Istanbul and Diyarbakır are not that different. At the heart of this movement is the restoration of public space in democracies. These are spaces that are open to all, and bring together men and women, Muslims and the non-religious, Alevis and Kurds, young and old, middle and lower classes. This has allowed for a new critical theory to circulate, one

that focuses on protecting the public space in its physical sense, with its ability for bringing people together in a convivial way. In the face of state oppression through commerce and morality, citizens have put culture before consumption and traded contempt for the respect for diversity. It is about lifting the taboo about the Armenian Genocide, making peace with Kurdish nationalists a possibility and withdrawing the army from public life; this movement announces the need for a new public culture based on recognition and acceptance. The future of Turkish democracy resides in the credo of this movement, which asks that those in power hold their tongues, abstain from moral intrusions, and ban violence. The Gezi movement is reuniting people across ancient divides by rejecting the pol-

itics of polarization and stigmatization. While it is predominantly a secular movement, it is not a movement in favor of authoritarian state secularism and the exclusion of Muslims from sharing the same public spaces. The square presents an opportunity and space for congregation, debate, support, and reassembling. The square becomes the stage where actors improvise and perform. In the square they create libraries, organize workshops, and distribute “*kandil simidi*” (a religious holiday bagel). They rehearse together new forms of citizenship.

The soul of this libertarian and unifying movement is best summed up by Nazim Hikmet’s poem: Live like a tree lone and free, live like brothers like the trees of a forest. ■