

## THE GEZI UPRISING AND PARTICULARITIES OF DISCONTENT<sup>1</sup>

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This summer's Gezi Resistance in Turkey has been variously referred to as the Turkish Spring and #OccupyGezi, while Taksim Square, its key locus, came to be listed among Tahrir, Syntagma and Puerta del Sol. It makes perfect sense to locate the Gezi moment amidst the global uprisings that have been capturing our imagination over the past couple of years. Indeed, the contagion of that imagination was palpable in Istanbul: before it exploded into a mass confrontation with the police on 31 May 2013, the camp at Gezi Park very much resembled the encampments at Zuccoti Park and St Paul's Cathedral aesthetically, highlighting the pertinence of Charles Tilly's (1986) formulation of 'repertoires of contention'. Later, when the very heart of Istanbul was liberated from effective state presence for ten days, one could spot graffiti that read 'Taksim will become Tahrir', while 'Syriza' was spray-painted over the gates of the Greek Consulate. When Brazil erupted, a few days into the Istanbul occupation, Brazilian flags appeared here and there in immediate solidarity. Clearly, the Gezi resistance already understood itself as part of a wider, global chain of discontent. However, to begin to understand what Gezi has brought to this budding new internationale, it is crucial to note the specificities of the historico-political context out of which it erupted.

In doing so, we can quickly dispense with the parochial 'Islam v. secularism' lens that some Western media outlets were so keen to employ in (mis)reading the Turkish uprising. The imposition of such a lens is in keeping with the erasure of the discursive markers of neoliberal expansion and anti-capitalist contention post-1989, when Turkey was magically transformed from a 'third-world developing country' into its new status as a 'Muslim country'. It is also obvious that the affinities with #occupy only go so far, and Taksim cannot ever become Tahrir. In the case of Turkey today, we have neither a population accustomed to first-world comforts being unequivocally

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asked to sacrifice themselves and their first-born for the sake of the recovery and well-being of the market in a crisis economy; nor a decades-long dictatorship that sustained itself on ceaseless cycles of dispossession, militarisation, and oppression, euphemistically referred to as 'stability' in Western market neospeak. Instead, there is a democratically-elected government that has been in power since 2002, currently serving its third term on nearly 50% of votes in the 2011 elections. Unlike the majority of civilian governments in the republic's short history of multi-party democracy, which were run by coalitions of at least two parties, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has consistently secured enough votes to rule single-handedly in this period. This has in turn allowed the government to pursue an economic agenda that has yielded high rates of economic growth, repositioning the country as an 'emerging market'. These distinct characteristics have been noted by commentators to suggest that the Gezi uprising, this 'trouble in paradise' (Žižek 2013), is the 'flip-side of the anti-capitalist coin' (Bektaş 2013) complementing the austerity revolts, and thereby evidencing the thoroughly global aspect of discontent with capitalism as a system. Indeed, Gezi was quite legibly a revolt against a pillar of AKP's 'growth miracle': recklessly unsustainable development enabled by arbitrary relaxation of environmental legislation and sometimes by outright non-implementation. We see this very clearly if we train our focus on the chain of events that triggered the uprising. And with this more attentive gaze we may also discern its historical significance, which would complement the attempt to locate Gezi on the map of global discontent.

On 27 May 2013 bulldozers began demolishing one side of central Istanbul's Gezi Park in the middle of the night in a blatant breach of existing planning permissions, much like vandals attacking public property on the sly. Some 50 people rushed to the site that night. During the following three days, the numbers of those keeping watch over the park increased exponentially, following each wave of attack by the police who were sent to secure the unlawful demolition by means of tear gas and brute force. On 29 May, Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed the by-then several hundred encamped in the park: 'Do what you like. We've made our decision and we'll execute it', referring to the plans for demolishing the park to make way for a shopping mall fronted with a façade of the 18th century Ottoman barracks once located there. The third police attack came at 5am on 31 May. About ten thousand had gathered in the park during the previous night, and three thousand had stayed over to be subjected to this pre-dawn attack. Tear gas and water from canons were sprayed liberally, the park-watchers were dispersed and the park cordoned off. Later in the day, an

administrative court ruled on the suspension of the demolition, effectively siding with the protesters. Following a call for a demonstration in the evening at the park, tens of thousands of people attempted to get there, but the police were intent on preventing assembly, attacking protesters and suffocating Taksim Square and the surrounding neighbourhoods in a cloud of tear gas for the entire evening and straight through the night. The outrage against police violence and this brutal manner of governance was amplified by the complicity of the national media outlets, the great majority of which are private, yet have been cajoled or coerced into obedience by governmental perks and threats over the last several years. There was a glaring disjuncture between what was being experienced on the streets and reported on in social media on the one hand, and the lack of any mention of ongoing police violence on all but one of Turkey's TV channels on the other.

What triggered the nationwide revolts was this combination of unlawful neoliberal appropriation of public property, the mobilisation of state-sanctioned violence against a citizenry opposing this illegality with direct action, and the blatant complicity of media outlets. When suggesting that we take this particular combination seriously, I do not mean either to discount or subordinate the many other grievances that the uprising came to channel, which I list here in no particular order: the government heaping insult on injury to the country's Alevi minority; the defiant lack of official investigation into air strikes that massacred Kurdish civilians in Roboski in December 2011; the bomb attacks in the border town of Reyhanlı by armed Syrian opposition groups that are supported by Erdoğan; the attempts to restrict abortion; the clampdown on public protests; the muzzling of the media by any means necessary; environmentally devastating private contracts for dams and goldmines throughout the country; the remorseless dispossession of the poor, and annexation of their neighbourhoods for private profit in the name of 'urban transformation'; the attack on Istanbul's cultural heritage by a government that desires to refashion it after its own garish image; the recent restrictions on the sale of alcohol, and the list goes on. All this and more made Gezi what it was, as everyone brought their own indignation out onto the streets. But the reason I want to emphasise the particular cocktail of the trigger itself – the de facto invalidation of legality, aggressive use of the repressive state apparatus, and media complicity – is because it serves as a microcosm of how neoliberalism has traditionally been implemented in Turkey, starting with the bloody military coup of 12 September 1980. Without recognising at least some of the ways in which the 1980 coup d'état continues to hum discordantly in the background of

Turkey's contemporary political life, we cannot begin to understand the rupture that the Gezi resistance constituted on the domestic scene, nor its proper position amidst the chain of global uprisings.

If what we have in the chain of events that triggered the Gezi uprising is a specific articulation of state violence and neoliberal dispossession, of lawless privatisation protected and perpetuated by the brutal force of law, the clearest first enunciation of that articulation was the 1980 coup d'état. It was based on the Latin American model tailored in Chicago: the coup was carried out to secure the 'stability' (i.e. remove the sore obstacles of parliamentary process, strong organised labour, and popular contestation) that was required to implement the '24 January 1980 Decisions', a series of austerity measures also known as the 'IMF Package' designed to introduce a free market economy and reposition Turkey on the map of global capital. The military coup claimed hundreds of lives (many opponents to the new order were executed by hanging, killed under torture or assassinated), more than half a million detentions, a quarter of a million political prosecutions. It simultaneously drowned the political aspirations of two generations of socialists and foreclosed the political imagination of later generations. In return it bestowed the country with the 'glittering shop windows' of a free market (Gürbilek 2010); a brand new, state-security-oriented constitution (the most undemocratic in the history of the republic and still in operation); and a sufficiently high election threshold that effectively keeps minorities and a whole range of opposition out of parliament (if a party fails to get 10% of the national vote, it cannot be allocated any seats in parliament, even though it may have secured the majority of votes in several – read, for example, Kurdish – cities).

The AKP government, hailed in the West as a beacon of democracy in the region, has been promising to introduce a new constitution and tackle the election threshold; though it is now clear that before taking these key steps, it has made sure to consolidate its power on the very basis of the antidemocratic hangover from the coup d'état. In this sense, what has appeared to be an intractable tension between AKP and the military masks a much deeper affinity. The fact that the AKP government has indeed significantly restricted military tutelage over political life in grand symbolic gestures of democratisation conceals the extent to which this government has not only successfully pursued the key goals of the 1980 coup d'état, expanding and further entrenching forms of neoliberal dispossession, but also inherited from the junta a certain grammar of governance. In taking the liberty to mobilise police brutality and the criminal justice system against almost every form of resistance and instance of

contention, AKP has not only counted on a scene of opposition whose nerve-ends were originally deadened by the coup d'état (save, perhaps, for the Kurdish movement), but also attempted to perpetuate that immobilisation by regular doses of local anaesthesia. In furthering an aggressive agenda of economic growth based on increasing labour productivity by continuously intensifying exploitations through precarisation and flexibilisation, AKP took for granted a polity of broken solidarities: defanged trade unions, interminable fragmentations on the left, and eminently governable enmities and resentments among the wider population. It is not that AKP inherited a fair social security system and then went about dismantling it; rather, it inherited a scene of dispossession which it then re-engineered to its electoral advantage. The existing social security provisions only benefited a limited section of society (wage-earners in the formal sector) while leaving out a significant part of the population, especially those living in poverty (Buğra 2011). In restructuring the social security system through neoliberal policies, AKP followed a strategy of pitting organised labour, those who were struggling to retain their existing rights, against unorganised labour, those who never had those rights to begin with and yet were for the first time extended a number of key benefits such as access to healthcare, unemployment compensation, and social aid based on a charity rather than a social justice model (ibid).

Considered in this light, the Gezi uprising addresses only part of the coup heritage, not yet articulating itself as a revolt against poverty, precarisation and exploitation. But what it has legibly addressed is already extremely significant: it has thrown off the yoke of an immobilising memory and postmemory of state violence; it has gifted post-coup generations with the euphoria of solidarity and a grasp of its limitless potential; it has created previously unimaginable alliances that have the potential to unravel ossified, and thus easily governable, subject-positions; and it has, for the first time since the coup d'état, brought the masses together to say 'we will not be governed this way'. If indeed 'This is just the beginning, our struggle will continue', as is still chanted on Turkey's streets, then Gezi has been a propitious start. Taksim cannot be Tahrir, but it has shown the world that the telos of the Arab Spring must not be the erroneously hailed Turkish model of rampant neoliberalism cloaked in moderate Islam. And Gezi is quite far from Zuccotti, but it has shown the world that the 'state interventionist' alternative (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2013) to the failing invisible-hand model of free market capitalism will also encounter resistance, despite growth and development and all that is fetishised by the masters.

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