

Apolitical is political: an ethnographic study on the public sphere in the Gezi uprising in Turkey

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Introduction

On the 31st May of 2013, the Gezi Park protests were launched in Turkey in order to protect Gezi Park from being razed and then converted into a shopping mall. These protests marked the first spontaneous mass movement, resisting the state apparatus, in Turkey's political history and involved the participation of diverse groups. Former left movements and organizations in Turkey remained limited to class politics which did not provoke much political interest in challenging gender, ethnic or religious based discrimination and the problems of diverse minority identities in Turkey. Even though leftist political protests, especially Mayday, had been able to amass a substantially large number of participants during the wave of radicalization since the late 1970s, Turkey has never before experienced a two week long continuous demonstration with millions of participants as in the case of Gezi Park. Since the Ottoman era of 1908, Turkey has had a tradition of parliamentary rule and 50 years of multiple parties. The dominant opposition has always been able to find its voice in the parliament. It was not until Gezi emerged that people were able to realize that no representational presence, party or group could adequately articulate their critiques within parliament or outside of parliament in the public sphere.

By the end of the peak period of the protests, the urban project of converting Gezi Park into a shopping mall was dismissed. However, the AKP government remained in power and won the local elections in March 2014 even though the primary reason behind the popularization of the Gezi protests was a widespread dissatisfaction with the AKP's increasingly authoritarian rule. The ultimate question following this reality must be: Did the Gezi uprising only gain Gezi Park? Can contemporary global political struggles bring social change or are these constituent uprisings to be dismissed as apolitical without any obvious productive agenda? In this article, I would like to explore what kinds of insights we can gain from this sort of activism. The challenge ahead is to understand what kind of a resistance structure and terms of operation are created within these protests and are able to reach people without any activist history.

For this purpose, I aim to explore the specificities of the Gezi uprising in Turkey with the help of ethnographic data and interviews with the Gezi protesters one month after the forceful eviction of Gezi Park by the police. My interviews were conducted in Istanbul with 12 participants who had no activist experience before the Gezi period. Interviews were selected through snowball sampling, and asked open-ended questions for a period of 45 minutes to 4 hours. I quote the English translation of the interview responses throughout this analysis. My

aim here is to give voice to the protesters without over-generalizing what they say and without pretending to represent their demands for direct democracy. Many mainstream analysts have tried to summarize their voices, while others dismiss them as apolitical because of their difference to earlier activists groups and movements. Some analysts insist on describing the Gezi movement as a mere secularist reaction against the moderate Islamist government, one unable to provide an alternative to the dominant neoliberal ideology.

However, I argue that the practice of the Gezi uprising gives us clues about not only the current global crisis of representative democracies, but also the crisis in traditional oppositional politics and resistance. The oppositional front must imagine alternative ways of sociality in its own operation in order to go beyond neoliberal, capitalist, representative governance and competition for interests within the political realm.

Beyond the Left and the Right: the apolitical is political

Why did politics suddenly become so popular to the masses during the Gezi Uprising? Why did so many so-called “apolitical” people become protesters? Even though old leftist groups, unions and political parties were in the first ranks of barricades, the massive presence of self-organized and networked protesters impacted the evolution of the protests and prevented the Gezi protests from being marginalized or contained within small-ranged activist groups. Thus, unlike the Occupy protesters in New York or Toronto, the Gezi protesters avoided becoming marginalized thanks to the mass-participation within the demonstrations and the coming together of already organized left-wing groups, labor unions, NGOs and first-time so-called “apolitical” protesters. During the Gezi period, one of the major achievements of the first-time protesters, who made up the great majority of the demonstrators, was their success in avoiding the lead or domination of a single group, such as traditional left-wing organizations or labor unions, while collaborating with those groups.

When I asked such ‘apolitical’ people why they became Gezi protesters they answered that they did not consider the Gezi protests “political” because they did not think that any party, association or alternative counter-organizations in public sphere could truly represent them. However, most of these first-time protestors still vote during election time¹:

Gezi is not political that is why I participated in it – Gezi does not belong to any party. I am an apolitical person and that is why I am a Gezi protester.
(manager in the private sector)

Somebody slips into my hand a manifesto. She said that’s enough with the system and so forth... I slowly put aside the brochure she gave me and got away to talk with my friends in Gezi.

¹ All interviews were conducted in Turkish and translated into English by the author.

I have not participated before in any protest. I do not have any affiliation with any party, to a leftist and right-wing group or any youth activist part of these associations. I do not have any political formation that I feel I belong in. I just marched one time in the Pride March to support them. Then, there was Cihan, I waited for him in Caglayan Court to support his cause. It was always for other people. No, I did not join any Mayday. (Law Student)

I joined some protests with my friends. I did not join Mayday. Sometimes I do not even go to Taksim Square because of the Mayday protests. It is dangerous because of state tyranny. But Gezi Protests are also very dangerous to be in but we were there anyway. Since I know people there in the Gezi Protests, they are just like me; I am not alone in Gezi. So I am sure other protesters are going to support me and help me there. (Visual artist)

People were there for their freedom. But the political associations were there for using it. I do not want to march under a political flag of CHP (Republican People's Party) or something else; I do not have such an allegiance for any group. (Student)

One of the interviewees admitted that even though he graduated from the highly politicized Istanbul University, he had never joined any political protest before Gezi:

I looked to the leftist groups in Istanbul University. Most of them are enclosed inside some firm patterns. They have already refused some things and they do not give permission to talk about the alternatives. Oh men, right-wing ones were starting to talk from the particle of grapefruit in the canteen and telling us through this example of grapefruit how the universe was created by God's wonders. As you can see, there is no great difference between them. They both have these fixed boundaries.

The bravery of the leftist comes from his being beaten. In fact, the only aim of the leftist is resisting the police and being the victim. I never voted for a right-wing party in my life but I also do not see myself inside the limited vision of the left.

Here two important critiques stand out regarding the understanding of politics and the traditional leftist forms of resistance. In the first place, the term "politics" possesses negative connotations of partiality and the "political" is imagined as antagonistic amongst specific identities with particular benefits or static revolution schema. Most leftist or right-wing associations look like hierarchical organisations where individuals become the "Other," to be guided. In this sense, they do not offer an alternative to the present power network or a communal system in their processing but instead another potential oppressor.

The terms “Left” and “Leftist groups” do not evoke freedom but the desire to seize power for most of the protesters who transformed the Gezi uprising into a mass protest. Most of the political parties, groups, and organizations were considered as another agent of oppression and as anti-democratic bodies.

To be sure, the horizontal practices of the Gezi Movement provoked the spread of the movement beyond the scope of small leftist pre-existing groups and transformed a small environmentalist protest into a mass movement. Many people who did not come together or for the same reasons became fellow protesters in the Gezi movement. Autonomism created a free space to escape from hierarchical organizations, processes of delegation and collectivity building which result in a sense of group belonging and othering both present in governmental and oppositional bodies in the existent system. In this sense, many of my interviewees argued that if the world was dominated by the traditional leftist politics, hierarchy would still prevent freedom. The leftist activists’ common notion that people need to be guided and enlightened about the terms of their exploitation is illusionary, because the first-time participants of the Gezi protests, who composed the great majority of the demonstrators, are perfectly aware of the fact that the leftist agenda does not offer a different way of being together beyond representational politics. That is why the “apolitical” does not mean to be disinterested in politics or assimilated to neoliberal culture, losing revolutionary power, but rather, it means rejecting the ways in which politics is traditionally conducted.

Jacques Rancière has argued that ‘consensus’ consists in the reduction of politics to the “police”, which therefore reduces people to the sum parts of the social body, and the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts (Rancière, 2010: 41). On the one hand, consensus frames among sensory data, and hence, indicates what is to be discussed as an issue of politics. On the other hand, Rancière’s term of ‘dissensus’ signifies a form outside of the “consensual landscape of the visible, the sayable and doable” (2010: 149). Thus, the policing activity of consensus allows or does not allow specific subjects to speak about the data chosen to appear in the public sphere. Yet, “dissensus” indicates a surplus, an abnormality, to the consensual system in the sense that it does not have a bargaining point with the present regime of interest-representative governmentality. The supposed apolitical aspect of the cycle of constituent global uprisings, in terms of possessing a clear political aim, interest, collective identity and so forth, means the inability of the political realm to define the popular dynamic of direct democracy. Thereby, the activist agenda must surpass or reform the range of potentially progressive movement dynamics such as labor, civil rights, community organizing, identity politics, feminism, disfranchised communities, and so on. More importantly, the reproduction of hierarchical community structures and the indirect decision making apparatus of the present system, including the oppositional groups, must be remedied by the activist agenda in order to reach the people who are demanding direct democracy and alternative sociality.

The politics of apolitics

The notion of the apolitical realm consists of what is outside of the agenda of dominant political claims and also who is outside of the scope of people envisioned as exploited or marginalized and not interested in engaging with activist groups. Hence, according to the dominant activist discourse, apolitical people can either be cynical, indifferent or ignorant; otherwise they can be the beneficiaries of the existing power structure. The fact that a major constituent of Gezi protesters came from the middle-classes demonstrated that potential political divisions such as ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and religion cannot totally account for some of the current dynamics in the age of the globalized police state and the highly-competitive environment of capitalist enterprises. Today, nobody is secure in the job market although they may not be completely exploited in economic terms. Besides this, there is no longer a “pure citizen” that cannot be suspected of terrorism. Hence, in the case of the recent global mass uprisings, such as the Gezi uprising, there is a great opportunity to engage in an analysis of the new terms for political engagement, as well as the need for alternative methods for progressive organizing. What is not seen in the political realm and labelled as “apolitical” in fact produces space in which social change can occur. In the following section, I will explore the traits of what I call, an alternative sociality, that people engaged in during the Gezi protests. I will argue that, the traits of this public experience indicate what is missing in both camps of the present political realm.

“Art” as non-commoditized labor was one of the most popular activities that Gezi protesters participated in. Images and videos of artistic production and performances in the Gezi commune were widely performed and shared without the expectation of economic gain. The visual communication of the artistic scenes in the Gezi movement formed a new hierarchy of value demonstrating that Gezi protesters were capable of art, and hence, they were worthy of having a voice. Prime Minister Erdogan, once claimed that Gezi protesters were “looters”. But Gezi protesters were not “looters,” nor a drain on the global society: what they produced was valuable although it did not bring material profit. Many of these artistic images were intended to oppose to the AKP’s interpretation of the Gezi Protesters as unproductive people whose demands were insignificant for the running of the Turkish economy. This art countered the argument of the AKP government that labelled the Gezi Protesters as the agents of some so-called hostile foreign powers that aimed to harm Turkey’s economic power. For the government supporters, the AKP’s eleven year administration of successful neoliberal development for Turkey’s economic growth was unquestionable. However, Turkey’s annual economic growth rate remained around 5% during the AKP’s leadership. This number was far from being the miracle that AKP supporters touted it as, and was indeed close to the average growth rate (4.5%) in Turkey since the foundation of the Republic in 1923.

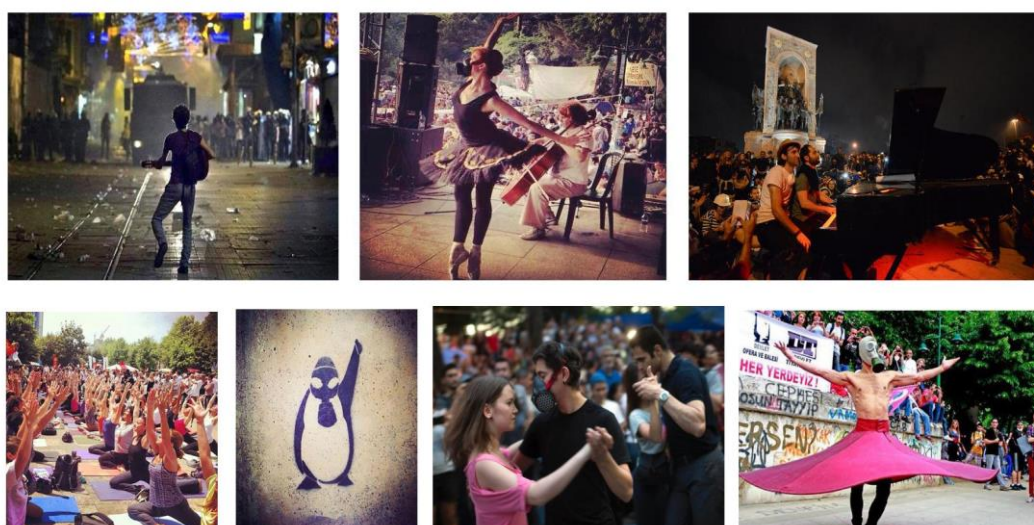


Figure 1 – Examples of art productions during the Gezi protests

As Gezi evolved, numerous illustrations, images and graffiti circulated online and offline that prioritized cultural development and production, and promoted the free exchange of the artistic creations and performances. The practice of art or sport as part of protest emphasized another way of life that allowed the public to rethink the concept of time not as an exploited resource to gain more capital but as a resource to enrich the soul. Music played a significant role in this rethinking. Songs were written and performed by the Jazz Group of Bogazici University, a new album by the rock music group Duman was dedicated to Gezi, and the piano performance of Davide Martello and Yigit Ozatalay on the night of 13th June 2013 in Taksim Square were shared on social media, countering the AKP's naming of Gezi Protesters as people who had nothing valuable to contribute to Turkey or the world. These positive messages of art, music and sport during the Gezi protests stood in sharp contrast with the mainstream media's portrayal of the Gezi protesters as violent groups or people without precious labor to add Turkey's economic production. One example of this contrast occurred when the police were demolishing the Gezi commune², one artist initiated the "Standing Man" protests by simply standing there in the middle of the Taksim Square for several hours without moving. The news of the "Standing Man" became the top-shared image among protesters. Other Gezi protesters joined him or replicated "Standing Man" protests in other parts of Istanbul and Turkey. Nonetheless, the mainstream media then depicted Gezi protesters as people who were against the development of Turkey and as people

² The protesters formed the Gezi commune in Gezi Park to prevent the police from destroying the Park. Between June 1st and June 15th, Gezi Park was governed by direct democracy and consensus. In the Gezi commune, people shared everyday life and all facilities without the mediation and the dictates of the state or the police.

who were satisfied by merely standing, while the government and its supporters tried to compete in the global market for progress and economic growth. The practice of producing and sharing artistic products without the expectation of economic gain through social media involves divergent definitions of the term “progress” and “product” that Gezi protesters appropriate in contrast to AKP’s understanding of the “good” in the neoliberal value system.

Gezi protesters, looters in the rhetoric of the AKP government, were considered as nearly useless in the capitalist world of speed since they want to escape from the logic of functionality and challenge the necessity of representational governance to communicate personally amongst each other. As Paul Virilio (2006) emphasizes, the political economy of wealth is not the sole driving force of cultural and social life in capitalism but instead it is the tyranny of eternally intensifying acceleration, an increasing speed that a developing country -such as Turkey- has to follow to compete in global capitalist system. Hence, this supposed necessity of competition and speed dominate social relations among people in their everyday lives in the “developing” Turkey. Not only in economic affairs but also in the social and political spheres relations amongst the people are understood in terms of antagonisms, othering and interest struggle. For example, one of my interviewees mentioned:

This country was so bad before, since there was not this experience of Gezi. Everybody was in solidarity in Gezi Park, helping and protecting each other. Before this, we were losing it, everybody became hostile, competitive, you always think badly of the other. Gezi Park looked like a Smurfs’ Village.
(manager in private sector)

After telling me about her experience of being shot with a tear gas shell during the protests, another interviewee told me:

Every time I go to the court, I do not trust the security people. The police do not protect people. People are protecting People. My heart usually beats fast in the crowds but I was in peace when I was in the Gezi Protests. I used to not believe in the possibility of being side by side with some of the people, but I did... I used to be prejudiced before. (Lawyer)

Other interviewees put emphasis on the presence of high profile professionals in the Gezi resistance. Some of them stated that they were gathering together after work to go together to the Gezi protests, or that they were passing time in Gezi Park during lunch breaks. They also stated the wide price range for gas masks on the faces, all of them together in the protests:

I know them from my previous job. They are CEOs. First I could not recognize them because of the gas masks they were wearing. Their monthly salary are 50 000 Turkish Lira at least. I asked why these people are also walking there.

Business people were coming after the end of workday with a family from Malatya with their thermos bottle of tea. Some people with high heels are coming just for curiosity.

I have some friends who did not speak of politics ever before...I learnt that they are making barricades there. They called us and they said they are all right but suffering from chemical water that was flushed from police forces. They are from very wealthy families. They use to go to private schools. But they do not care.

Not only economic impoverishment but social impoverishment can lead people to revolt and fight for an alternative sociality that is free from the need for speed or for economic development and interest-based competition. A public sphere free from capitalist motives is attractive for people who suffer from the competitive drive of capitalism such as my interviewees above.

Several interviewees also mentioned the position of the “Street’s Children” in the Gezi Protests. Street’s Children consist of young male children between the age of 8 to 18 years old, who are living on the streets in and around the Taksim area:

The Street’s children were really important there...They first wanted to not wait in the food line with self-interested mode since they were so accustomed to be in survival mode for so long. But then, they understood they can get the food there anyway. They started to appropriate Gezi Park. They were in the first rank of barricades because they did not want Gezi to be over. Nobody gave importance to them until the Gezi protests I guess. They looked like happy to be there.'

Both the children of the protesters and street’s children were there together in the play atelier of Gezi Park, famous artists were collecting the rubbish with other ordinary people.

In other words, other ways of interaction were promoted among Gezi protesters in Gezi commune. This not only means that alternative behaviours gained the meaning of “valuable”, but also that the terms of public appearance changed when the system of delegation lost its validity. Every protester was involved in the protests through her/his own personal commitment, without the label of identity, class or any group affiliation since these notions of entity do not resume their being there in the sphere of Gezi commune. This indicates the emergence of a new “common”, and the production of divergent social relations diverging from the existent system. Thus, as Massimo De Angelis puts it, it is

through the production of the commons that new value practices emerge and divide-and-rule strategies dividing the social body on the basis of material interests can be contrasted. Thus, De Angelis determines, the “common” of capitalist production as sharing rules and practices reproduces the antagonisms amongst the producers of community within an endless race to succeed and survive in the market (De Angelis, 2007).

The Gezi uprising constructed a seductive other world. Our misery does not only derive from our lack of wealth and resources, but also from being separated from each other in the capitalist world based on efficiency, immediacy, urgency and the representational way of being together without personal experience in public.

Concluding thoughts

What is called “apolitical” cannot find a place for itself in the current capitalist system and that is why it contains the seeds for the demise of the status-quo. On the one hand, the political begins with what is assumed to be apolitical. On the other hand, autonomist movements are frequently criticized for occupying everything except the parliament. These kinds of critiques are construed narrowly because the understanding of power central to them is that of possessing a central apparatus such as the state, parliament, mainstream media, with an assumption of the totality of the relations of power. In the case of the global popularization of middle class revolts, activist agendas must acknowledge the results of a shrinking safety net and socio-political life for every segment of the community across the world. Following this mobilization trend and the growth of the police state, activist organizations can begin from organizing in the social realm from what is assumed to be apolitical. This is not a teaching job but a learning moment for activism.

Today, both the existent consensual system and traditional oppositional organizations do not offer a new type of sociality beyond the representational paradigm of participation. However, contemporary political struggles popping out all over the world provide a divergent way of sociality and indicate the desire for a different kind of relating with each other in the global community. These mass uprisings must guide our imaginations as new understandings of the oppositional front are developed.

The fact that the Gezi protests or other examples of constituent mass uprisings could not survive in the long term does not mean that autonomism does not provide endurance to resistance, but rather that the institutionalization of these autonomist uprisings must follow the operational principle of the protests and the logic of personal commitment to engage in direct democracy. Today, records of the new protest tactics are still spreading through social media and help to create new and diverse prospective activist formations beyond the representational public experience. In the Hong Kong protests beginning at the end of September 2014, the protesters used similar tactics as those in Gezi,

while also mimicking the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture to refer protesters in Ferguson, Missouri over the killing of unarmed teen Michael Brown³. It is not already-organized activists but the ordinary first-time protesters that lead the demonstrations and raised their demands for more democracy, justice and equality.

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Balca Arda is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her dissertation project “The Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora in North America in the post-September 11 Era” seeks to contribute to aesthetic theory on contemporary art, which puts forward questions concerning whether the emancipatory capacity of oppositional arts has withered away in late liberalism. During her undergraduate studies at Bogazici University in Turkey, she co-founded “Davetsiz Misafir” (The Uninvited Guest), an intellectual journal of science-fiction, cinema and critique. She pursued her graduate studies at the University of the Arts London in the field Digital Arts. From 2008-2010, Balca was a member of the artist residency of Borusan Art Center. She pursued another MA in the political science department at Bogazici University, and her thesis was on the Transformation of the Oppositional Art in Turkey. She can be reached at tbalca13AT yorku.ca

³ “In Hong Kong, Protesters Say ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’” *MSNBC*, September 28, 2014. <http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/riot-police-tear-gas-pro-democracy-demonstrators-hong-kong>.