

Bodies on the streets: gender resistance and collectivity in the Gezi revolts

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Abstract

In summer 2013, Istanbul was shaken by an enormous public protest which, besides its afflictive traces, engraved a great image of solidarity and change in the political history of Turkey. Whilst this solidarity comprised diverse groups of different political ideologies and identities, some of the most outstanding actors of the revolts were women and LGBT individuals who have been suffering from state oppression as gendered bodies. The Gezi Park occupation not only enabled them to experience new forms of mobilization but also altered the perception of gender on a greater scale during the revolts. Starting with an overview of the driving forces of the Gezi Park riots, this paper focuses on this practice of mobilization and the question of how gendered bodies could build a collective identity through the immediate moments of solidarity via reclaiming public space as politicized bodies during the revolts. It also addresses the potential ways in which these newly learnt strategies can be used for the future politics. These inquiries draw on our personal observations and oral testimonies of the protestors in interviews. Lastly, it hopes to provoke further discussions about the future politics of gender activism in Turkey.

Keywords: *Collective identity, Gezi Park revolts, LGBT rights, solidarity, women's movement*

Introduction

“Nobody, none of us has become purified in Gezi. But something happened, beyond telling and understanding. Something that have never happened before and that would have never happened, we thought. What happened in Gezi was convergence [...] Can you just think a moment and bewail for why there was nothing to believe, but poetry; a poetry that experiences to converge to your tough and arid consciousness as a brand-new and fresh way of knowing and communicating?” (Halavut, 2013: 21)

The summer of 2013 bore witness to one of the most extensive demonstrations that burst in the heart of Istanbul and spread all around Turkey in a couple of weeks. Beside the fact that during the last years the world has been hosting increasing street protests and demonstrations that have permeated from one to another across countries and cross-continentals as a result of the neoliberal politics of global states which have resulted in ever-increasing unemployment, precarity, gender discrimination, privatization of public spaces, gentrification,

neo-fascism, detention of refugees and border controls - and that Turkey could be considered as one of the terminal points of these protests - what happened in Istanbul needs a close-up with respect to its recent history and its internal driving forces. It is equally important to acknowledge the outcomes and great impacts of demonstrations that have left incontrovertible impressions on both institutional politics and spatial politics in everyday life.

These after-effects and impacts ensue from an immediate and immense uprising that was organized in only a few weeks and conveyed from one person to another by creating an immersive living environment, almost an utopian habitat in Gezi Park.¹ This system does not refer to any pre-planned order that was taught before. Nor were demonstrations, tactics and reactions against police violence predetermined by thousands of protesters, most of whom had never participated in such an action before. This affirms that the Gezi Park experiences were built through a collective and informal process transferred among individuals and groups. Furthermore, it is crucial for this knowledge to be relayed to upcoming generations in order to maintain and transform this spatial and temporal experience into a new form of politics that could be exercised by anyone who has a say.

Undoubtedly, the knowledge and experience shared in mobilization was deployed among groups who have been exposed to long-lasting oppression, exclusion and neglect including women, LGBT groups, ethnical minorities, radical left wings and even Islamist groups². Although all these groups experienced different but related kinds of mobilization and learning process according to their internal claims and issues, 'gendered' groups left their mark on the protests as a result of both their awe-inspiring resistance against recent discriminative politics of the government and of their political strategies of mobilization, demonstration and manifestation during the actual events.

The Gezi Park protests are quite significant at this point, not only for the activists, but also for women and LGBT individuals who had not been active on the streets, nor participated in any political movement, but took part in this process of mobilizing and acting together during the protests.

¹ Following the daily police intervention with extreme violence, from the 1st of June to the 14th of June, there was a solidly independent and autonomous life form in Gezi Park which was built by both dwellers and visitors of the park. Until the police intervention on the 14th of June, Gezi Park had its own library, pharmacies, free food spots, kitchens, toilets, a vegetable garden, a playground for children, education spots and stages for musicians with participation of thousands of people every day. This is one of the reasons why most of the people called it an utopia, a stateless place that maintained itself without any institutional support, but through people's will and responsibility.

² Radical Islamists or people belonging to other religious orders also confronted the conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party, the ruling party of Turkey since 2002) despite their former religious common roots. Anti-capitalist Muslims, for instance, were one of the most active groups and played a crucial role in revolts, challenging the government's capitalist and neoliberalist strategies from privatization to expropriation.

This paper aims not only to take a closer look at the practice of constructing collective identity among gendered groups in the context of the Gezi revolts, but also to stimulate discussions about the motivation of their engagement by touching upon particular incidents that brought them together. Moreover, it is equally significant to highlight the new tactics that emerged during their solidarity and potential strategies and that can be perpetuated by collective-political-gendered bodies in the reclaimed public space. As a supportive method to this contextual framework underpinned by theories germane to the issue, testimonies and narratives of the protestors interviewed during the process are used as well as our personal observations and memoirs based on our own experiences.

Nevertheless, in order to conceive both the aforementioned contextualization better and the reason why the Gezi revolts were particularly substantial for the women and LGBT movement in Turkey, it is important to sketch out the main driving forces of the protests and a partial backstage view of the massive participation. This overview will hopefully depict the profile of recent conservative state politics and the ways in which these repressed women and non-normative sexualities by rendering them marginalized, deprived and foreclosed from public space.

Before it all

“Gezi was not only a youth’s movement, but also a women’s movement in its all wide-ranging aspects. Gezi meant the number of children, the issue of abortion, the remarks saying “not equal”, ever-increasing/never-ceasing femicides, rapes, unlegislated laws and impunity that have already been on top of women.”
(Amargi Feminist Tartışmaları, 2013:4)

The main departure point of the Gezi revolts took place on the day that government’s construction vehicles attempted to cut down some of the trees in Gezi Park: a park located in the centre of Istanbul as almost the only green space around the neighbourhood. Cutting trees in order to widen the driveway was only a small part of a grand transformation project in the district that government dictated despite the long-lasting professional adjudicators by Chamber of City Planners and Chamber of Architects. Even though the project that comprised pedestrianization of Taksim Square along with the numerous gentrification and privatization interferences all around Istanbul had been objected to by Taksim Solidarity Group for two years with an insufficient support and a poor public attention, the very attempt to cut trees in Gezi Park encountered enormous public reaction. The reason justifying the magnitude of this backlash was not only that the government intended to deprive people of the only green space around the neighbourhood by disregarding legal

procedures and to build a retro-construction against the urban fabric³, but also AKP's, mainly Tayyip Erdoğan's, repressive politics and untenable restraints over people who are not in favour of his power. Furthermore, the extreme police violence which followed immediately after the public reaction and lasted more than two months cannot be denied as an impulse for hundreds and thousands of people to flow into the streets of Taksim Square.

The restraints and oppressions by an eminently conservative power, a power that embodies a paradoxical combination of Islamic doctrines and neo-liberalist ideologies, render excluded people even more suppressed and disfranchised. This complexity first and foremost awakened the youth, a generation regarded as depoliticized, digitalized and detached from reality and raised with the advice of their elders who experienced the disappointment of the 1980 military coup and have therefore decided to stay away from any political debate or preoccupation (Gürbilek, 1992). Notwithstanding this, the Gezi Park protests turned all these labels upside down and gave an enormous space for bodies to be manifested, including young people and most importantly women and LGBT groups who have been dramatically affected by the regime.

Women, as one of the foremost groups suffering in Turkey from economic, physical and psychological suppression⁴, have received their share of the restrictive regulations and policies of AKP government in recent years. These anti-human and anti-women's rights acts revealed in many occasions as hate speeches by 'all the president's men' - ministers, majors, academics – and even as a law or a regulation always intervening around women's bodies, lifestyles, decisions and private - thereby social - lives.

³ The government and municipality, whose position was mostly stated in Erdoğan's public speeches, wanted to make a modernist replica of Topçu Kışlası, the historical barracks that was built in the 19th century in the square where Gezi Park is located today and demolished earlier in the 1940s. (Alioğlu, 2013) The idea was to rebuild it by chopping down all the trees in Gezi Park and to use the new barracks as a shopping mall and an archipelago of cafes for modern conservative bourgeois.

⁴ Contradictorily, Turkey is proud of equality between men and women because it is one of the prominent countries that enacted early women's suffrage of women. However, this law represented only a symbolic equality, as seen by the fact that the main women's organization was banned just after suffrage was accepted. (Kandiyoti: 1991) Before and since then, women's gathering and mobilization in public space have been seen as a threat for the male-oriented sovereignty. Moreover, according to Kandiyoti, in modern states, women have been always used as a symbol of liberation in society, almost as a criterion for democratic reforms. The problem of gender equality was either used by governments in order to prove equality through suffrage or symbolic laws that are not exercised practically. (Kandiyoti, 1991) In other cases, women have most of the time been considered as physical supports for anti-governmental actions; however, after male citizens' demands are fulfilled, women, again, have been doomed to be domesticated and closed to their private space whilst public space remained belonging to only men's interests (Kandiyoti, 1991).

Despite the difficulties of depicting the whole picture of abuse of women's rights during the AKP's time in power, remembering some recent events can shed light on what triggered thousands of women to hit the streets for protest, although many of them had never been in a demonstration before.

Since the last elections (2011), which brought the AKP government to power once more, Erdoğan has been treating women as a means of implementing AKP's neoliberal economic policies and capitalist structures. These structures are to make women housebound via new regulations for families, cheap labour, decreasing women's employment and insufficient social services for mother employees (Osmanoğlu, 2009). Especially applying their conservative paternalist ideology on both judiciary and daily practices, they strive to invalidate woman's position by identifying and subordinating them to family as a sacred and "safe" place.

One of the cases that received a major public attention was the name change of the Ministry of Women to the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in 2011. *Prima facie*, such small changes would seem harmless for nonconversant observers; nevertheless it provides a nominal and ostensible democracy that safeguards the institution of family in which women are being imprisoned through their household missions. Erdoğan strongly defended the change by sanctifying women as mothers, meanwhile repudiating LGBT rights in the same issue, stating that "homosexual coupling is immoral"⁵. Moreover, the conservatism of the AKP government accompanied by strong nationalist tendencies is approved with Erdoğan's call for three children from each Turkish woman for the future of the nation - in his last call the number of children demanded increased to five.⁶ This clear declaration is just another strategy to domesticate women as baby-sitters who take care of their husbands and children, having no time for other needs and thereby being deprived of any political or social activity.

Another important breaking point for women that turned into a massive protest in recent years was the draft law proposing strict restrictions for the right of abortion. Since 1983, abortion is permissible by law up to ten weeks; Erdoğan and his pro-life followers wanted to limit this to four weeks by claiming that "abortion was nothing short of a murder."⁷ Although the proposal was withdrawn as a result of massive protests, the underlying meanings are important to analyze. Firstly, the state has the right and power to control women's body from clothing to giving birth; and secondly, even if they do not

⁵ <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/lgbtt/145282-erdogan-escinsel-cift-ahlaka-ters>

⁶ <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/776812-3-az-5-cocuk-yapin>
http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/erdogan_sezaryene_karsiyim_kurtaj_cinayettir-1089120. Furthermore, the Minister of Health promised that in exceptional cases like rape the state will take care of newborns.

⁷ http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/bakan_akdag_tecavuz_bebegine_devlet_bakar-1089651

succeed in implementing their ideology in the form of law, they can find other ways of imposing their rules such as blacklisting women in the hospitals or intimidating them in 'conviction rooms' that dissuade women from their decisions (Özkul, 2013).

Even though these anti-human policies occurred before the Gezi Park protests, they continued in different forms afterward, just as the speech of the President of Religious Affairs that was held in the following days of the protests. In his speech, he prescribed to women's organizations that they should rather strive around violence against humanity than violence against women.⁸ The speech demonstrates that conservative politics on women's bodies are relativized by those who hold the power. Moreover, the extent of discrimination against LGBT individuals is also visible within this statement inasmuch as lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans*people are not even a subject in society. Yet physical and psychological violence against LGBT people in public space is ignored, just as their bodies are neglected.

Following these brief insights about the recent but long-standing history of gender oppression and invisibility of women and LGBT people in Turkey, it can be said that these were important factors that dragged them to the streets by June 2013. As activists and academics, our interest is to inquire how such an incredible amount of people could gather as one big organism regardless of their ethnicity, political view, religion, status and socio-economic background; and more importantly how they practiced their political presence in the process of this mobilization, which paved the way for an enormous resistance against power. What made this possible was neither authority nor any form of educational system which all pledge for democracy as a symbol of "politics"; but *the people* and their socially and politically so-called effaced bodies. The next sections embark on looking at these political bodies in the public space where they become the subject again and their emergent collective identity from a theoretical perspective.

From political to collective bodies on the streets

"We can no longer allow others to repress our fucking, control our shit, our saliva, our energies, all in conformity with the prescriptions of the law and its carefully-defined little transgressions. We want to see frigid, imprisoned, mortified bodies explode to bits, even if capitalism continues to demand that they be kept in check at the expense of our living bodies". (Guattari, 2007: 209)

Guattari's words perfectly echo what women and LGBT people in Turkey shouted in response to their exposure to the long-standing repressive policies of

⁸ "Kadına karşı şiddetle uğraşıcağınaza..." Radikal Newspaper, 23 August 2013
http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/kadina_yonelik_siddetle_ugrasacaginiza-1147355.

the government in combination with other “state apparatus” such as education, law, family institutions (Althusser, 1970); thus increasing police violence as stated before. Just as other excluded and disenfranchised groups that have been reduced to “bare life” (Agamben, 1998) by sovereign powers regarding their identities and socio-economic status, women and LGBT people demanded their rights back and tried to find ways to reclaim them when there was no interlocutor. This demand, in fact, is intrinsically a political stance; but in order to fulfil the demand, there has to be a political action that would remind sovereignty of people existing even if they are ignored.

Such political actions like Gezi Park, which take place autonomously and spontaneously, entail a “space of appearance” which renders people visible to each other, in the sense that one needs to be seen by someone in order to exist (Arendt, 1958). Butler further elaborates Arendt’s term by stating that presence is not enough for space of appearance which ignores illegals, foreigners, slaves, people in colour, women and trans*people; but it is actualized when people act against, stand for or go out of the boundaries of state rules (Butler, 2011). So, even in the risk of facing aggression of the police or threat of governmental authorities, multitudes appear in/in front of public, gather and manifest themselves as in reciprocal relation between each other. As she puts it,

“No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only ‘between’ bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another’s. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the ‘between.’”(Butler, 2011: 3)

In parallel, where the action emerges, ‘between’ bodies, is also the very space where politics is being exercised. Borrowing Arendt’s terms, actions create their own space, which is deployed between other bodies (Arendt, 1958). So this means that such correlated and interdependent relationship between body, action and space, which together brings about political exercise, becomes possible only via plural action that has freedom and power to create action and space for politics (Arendt, 1958; Butler, 2011). Or in other and wider terms, the exercise of politics is only possible in the conditions where bodies assembly to claim their rights; thus in this very action of claiming - including physical resistance against police violence and occupation of the physical public space - it builds a collective will that political beings act upon in their space of public that they create. It is also a confrontation and defiance of people against state, thereby a manifestation of “we the people” (Butler, 2013).

This revival of “we the people” paves the way for Snow’s (2001) “we-ness” and “collective agency” in the process of weaving the threads of solidarity. As della Porta and Diani state, collective action cannot emerge without a “we” identified with common characteristics and particular solidarity (della Porta and Diani, 2006). Therefore, following the Arendtian and Butlerian standpoint of creating political space in between bodies and reclaiming their agency as being publicly

manifested, this plural subjectivity transforms into a collective being, a form of collective identity: an identity that “includes a sense of mutuality and solidarity” (Hunt and Benford, 2004: 434) as well as “common interests, values, feelings, and goals exist in time and space beyond the here and now” (Hunt and Benford, 2004: 450).

When considering the conception of collective bodies into account and convey them to practice, Gezi Park was a remarkable embodiment of the theories above in terms of people’s assembly, stance, interaction with other anonymous bodies and resistance together in a plural action. Alongside their verbal and textual claims, their bodies and voices appeared to each other and reproduced a new form of public characteristics in their common physical environment (Butler, 2011) with an undeniable rapport. Especially women and LGBT groups were distinctively effective at mobilizing people and triggering motivation and energy in Gezi Community, even during the police interventions. This process of building solidarity enabled them not only to conceive how to organize and reactivate their spaces in Gezi Park and Taksim Square, but also to experience new ways of being woman, gay, lesbian, trans or queer as a political actor via mobilization (della Porta and Diani, 2006).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that what was created in Gezi Park was not a taken-for-granted collective identity that is seen in existing political anti-state movements, but a “multiple identity” (della Porta and Diani, 2006) that was woven during the protests as a result of “common cause and fate [that were] shared.” (Hunt and Benford, 2004: 439). Similar to Polletta’s and Jasper’s accounts on collective identity of being “fluid”, “relational”, “emerging out of interactions among a number of different audiences, rather than fixed” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 292;298), during the Gezi Park protests, the new collective identity against state power functioned as a big erratic living organism that was shaped during the triggering events. It is important to analyze such events in order to understand the greater ways of mobilization, solidarity and collective action which altered the existing condition of gender resistance in Turkey.

The forms of mobilization in the Gezi revolts

The noteworthy visibility of women and LGBT individuals during the protests corroborated with intimacy and solidarity is quite important in terms of both its influence that created strong bonds among people and its potential for creating new strategies for future politics. It is equally significant to underline two important driving forces that engendered this collective action and its expansion. The first was the expropriation and privatization of people’s common public space as well as the existing oppressive politics of the government; the second was the extreme physical police violence underpinned by state violence in discourse.

To exemplify the argument, in the first days of the protests, the majority of thousands of protesters did not have knowledge of how to resist such a dreadful physical violence, involving tear gas weapons and cannons. However, the more

the police increased their ferocity, the more people started being organized and working in accordance by putting barricades while others were confronting with the police at the front or helping injured people. This new form of division of labour was not learnt by telling or directing, but was developed with insights and experiences on the streets driven by the need for resistance and survival.

Being exposed to preposterous physical violence, people started understanding the ways of dealing with gas attacks, cannon waters and rubber bullets and developing new ways of struggling with them. Jasper (1997) calls such instantaneous driving forces of solidarity as “moral shocks” which can lead people to mobilize from one moment to another. For instance, after the first police interventions, people got to know that under extreme tear gas attacks, panic was not a good way to respond, particularly in a park containing hundreds of people. Also, they realized that the removal of children from the park had priority, as well as awareness of breath, how to walk and how to decrease the pain. Furthermore, thousands of street insurgents developed new strategies for sustaining disobedience: people resisting in the forefront were getting tired and taking turns with those coming to the front, in order to get rest and turn back - and the circulation worked. After a while, it was tacitly realised that tear gas must be immediately thrown somewhere else further from people to avoid the gas spreading. Moreover, in one week, people became almost expert on what medical solution should be used for what kind of gas attacks. There was a circulation there as well: While some were in the forefront, others were waiting with the medical supports and taking turns with the others.

Women and LGBT people at this point, as groups that are subjugated to a paternal state and always considered as vulnerable and weak in confrontations, were one of the most important parties of the physical resistance. Although at the beginning they were told to be away from the chaotic environment of the revolt by male protestors, afterwards it was proven that political strength was not about physical and sexual conditionings. Women and LGBT people became the symbol of the resistance with their bodies and existence⁹. It was very important for them to gain courage and to learn how to resist in the streets against violence that was just another form of the violence they have been exposed to by husbands, fathers, brothers, bosses, lovers and homophobic or transphobic aggressors. The more they saw each other in resistance - in the ‘space of appearance’, the more they conveyed their courage to each other and intuitively conceived the strategies which would be adapted into their daily struggle as well. For instance, the long-lasting problem about police stations and detention rooms was brought to the agenda back by dint of the Gezi revolts

⁹ Especially pictures that became the representation of the revolts: the woman with the red dress whose face was sprayed with tear gas by a policeman from one foot away; a woman holding a cannon’s water on her chest; a gay standing upright on top of barricades and waving the LGBT flag to the police fire.

during the mass and immediate arrestments¹⁰. Women and LGBT people are especially forced to go through a naked body search when they get arrested, despite its incompatibility with human dignity. This issue was unfolded after some surveillance camera captures of women being compelled to get undressed and being groped were disclosed. The voice of women and trans*people in particular fuelled the discussions about human-rights abuse and harassment in custody which brought about awareness and consciousness on the issue that many people mobilized for.

No wonder that the violence aspect was crucial for bodies to make them gather in space, act together and shout slogans in unison, but it was not the only one. The other important aspect was nonviolent interaction between people during the occupation of the park. Helping each other, working together and living in peace as if dwelling in a utopian commune; people realized that even demarcations between opponents and prejudices were melted down in the pacific atmosphere of the park and the streets. In a country of patriarchy, machismo, homophobia and misogyny, Gezi Park became almost the only sterilized public place where both women and LGBT people felt sexually and mentally emancipated to the point of being surprised by not being verbally and physically harassed. Although, indeed there are no statistics about the rate of harassment in Gezi Park or in the streets during the protests, it was genuinely experienced that people in gender were much more confident, free and 'themselves' without the need of omnipresent guards. Furthermore, even though the exaggerated optimism that was considering Gezi Park as a purified place was delusive, the fact that women and LGBT people gained the knowledge of living in a patriarch-free space was indisputable as an experience that is to be transferred to other people and generations.

Another important moment for women particularly in constructing a collective identity took place in Taksim Square when the Governor of Istanbul appealed to mothers to call their children back home¹¹. However, instead of doing so, hundreds of mothers hit the Istanbul streets and started demonstrating in Taksim Square with lots of joy, strength and stance against the police.

“On the contrary to what was expected, mothers joined to the protests with their children. It broke the prejudgement that women will never get a free area which is independent from their husbands and children. A canonical model of motherhood is now altered from someone who redresses her child to someone who encourages her child, because she is protesting with her child. The importance of change on the concept of woman in a country where decisions are

¹⁰ Many people were arrested and charged just because they shouted slogans, visited the park or just casually passed through the streets even without having any relationship with the protests.

¹¹ He agitated the situation by claiming that young people who are our future and precious had no life safety in Gezi Park, so it was mothers' task to convince them to recede.

<http://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/147482-mutlu-gezi-dekilerin-can-guvenligi-yok>

taken by men who impose stereotypical gender roles on women, alongside with the reinforcement of mainstream media that reproduces it, is not something to be overlooked.” (Üstek and Alyanak, 2013)

The analysis of Üstek and Alyanak also goes along with what Butler (2011) expresses: to experience new ways of being a woman as a political actor and to get the opportunity at this very social moment to be able to create a peculiar space between other bodies (Arendt, 1958). This enabled the common stereotypes about the mother identity to be deconstructed and redefined. As Levent, one of the protesters stated, the resistance enabled women to regain the legitimacy and to break the rooted norms (Kızıldağ and Sebik, 2013).

In addition to collective acting process, there are some incidents that happened within the groups as gaps, but transformed into a positive heterogeneity. Taking different parties, different ideologies and different bodies coming together into account, Yelsalı Parmaksız (2013) describes the phenomenon that feminists with Kemalist¹² approach were formative for the second wave women's movement in Turkey until now. The Gezi revolts demonstrated that this may not be limited within this perspective. Yet the paradigm of Kemalist feminists has changed: especially intolerance of Kemalist feminists against Kurds and women wearing headscarves (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2013) due to the Kemalist secularism that rejects Islam as a visual image and its nationalist racialism that excludes other ethnic groups or languages. Nevertheless, after all the women from different ethnicities and religions came together, Kemalists overcame the prejudices of diversity and embraced women regardless of their 'identity'. This is a turning point for women's solidarity as a significant approach to convey to the next generations. It is also interesting in its pedagogical aspect: although human-rights and consciousness about anti-discrimination are taught in all the levels of education which is supposed to create non-discriminatory individuals, they are so immersed with Kemalist doctrines since their childhood that they cannot include any 'other' parties for the sake of secular-democratic country. However, Gezi Park broke the mould and made Kemalist women embrace their fellows just as woman-beings and sisters. It means that the process of standing shoulder to shoulder works differently in so much as that it can change a hundred-year perspective through experiences and collective moments. This incident set a precedent to what della Porta and Diani says:

“To identify with a movement also entails feelings of solidarity towards people to whom one is not usually linked by direct personal contacts, but with whom one nonetheless shares aspirations and values. [...] motivations and expectations behind individuals participating in social movements are, in fact, much richer

¹² Kemalism, also known as Atatürkism, is the main ideology of Turkish Republic which follows the principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the secular and “Westernized” Turkey.

and more diversified than the public images of those movements” (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 95; 98)

On the other hand, the peaceful atmosphere of the Gezi utopia and solidarity among different groups were occasionally interrupted by old traditions of protesting manifested in the language. Racist, sexist, homophobic and ethnic discriminations are so rooted in society that they have been used as a matter of insulting and humiliating the ‘others’ in Turkish. Not surprisingly, this old habit was brought to Gezi protests by white-Turkish-middle class-male protesters although they were marching shoulder to shoulder with non-white-Turkish-middle class-men against the same authority. Protesters in slogans were despising the men in power by using feminine attributions and the word ‘queer’ as an insult without thinking that queers and women were just acting with them in solidarity.

A great reaction against this habit came from feminist groups. Women activists immediately mobilized an action of wiping sexist slogans out from the walls written during the revolt. They started painting over sexist slogans street by street and wall by wall with the colour purple, sometimes by changing insults to something creative and sometimes transforming words into the symbol of Venus. This important action was rewarded as a moment of awareness for male protesters. For instance, the anarchist group Çarşı which is the supporters club of the soccer team Beşiktaş revealed its solidarity with the criticism of feminists and also decided refraining from calling sexist slogans. As the feminist magazine Amargi describes:

“Everyone witnessed the success of feminists who were intervening to sexist slogans, cleaning street writings [because of their sexist discourse] and trying to transform them. They marched together when they heard that women with headscarves were beaten.” (Amargi Feminist Tartışmaları, 2013: 7)

The action of “painting over the sexist scripts with the colour purple” was followed by the placards and slogans that appeared all around Istanbul: “Don’t swear at women, queers and prostitutes!” By doing so, feminists and LGBT groups have particularly demonstrated that they also have right on the space of resistance and are as visible as the other demonstrators (Korkman and Açıksöz, 2013). Furthermore, they not only actualized the conditions of ‘space of appearance’ with their political stance, but also paved the way for re-questioning the language of protests and realizing the mistakes - especially for male participants. This incident is fairly mentioned in the analyses of Korkman and Açıksöz:

“Here, what feminist criticism has taught us is this: The reality that is reflected on the wall of the resistance; the reverse of sexist ideology on from its *camera obscura*. The fact that profane phallic slogans target on Erdoğan’s masculinity

signifies being uncomfortable with his dominant male performances. So to say, the problem is Tayyip's masculinity¹³. The sun side of the picture is that the long-standing feminist struggle has contributed to this feeling of discomfort about Tayyip's masculinity and his attitudes as if he is father, husband and brother of the whole society." (Korkman and Açıksöz, 2013)

These *eureka* moments are important, for in the history of Turkish feminist movement political actions and strategies implemented by feminist groups were most of the times considered unnecessary or insufficient. However, with the rise of the Gezi protests, their critique of patriarchal structures was understood; meanwhile perception of gender has changed as a result of new understanding of feminists' actions. The epitomic success became possible because the processes of mobilization allowed the notion of gender - as well as race and class categorizations - to lose its fundamental aspects for the common resistance. It does not mean that people appeared in the public space without their identity; on the contrary, they did not avoid exposing their identity, but it did not bring obstacles for a common solidarity. Thus, most importantly, the long-running feminist struggle regained its dignity.

As mentioned before, the examples on different angles of gender resistance and mobilization during the protests given above are not processes that can be formalized as systematic methods. Yet, it is important to pay attention to the voices of resisters from the first hand in order to comprehend what and how they experience their collectivity and motivation. They were able to represent themselves via their own wills through their actions by being present in the very time and space of the Gezi revolts on the contrary to the conventions of Turkey representing gender in media, in art and in institutional politics with its patriarchal and dominating language.

Having been interviewed during the occupation of the park both by us and by other reporters, protestors answered the questions about their feelings and thoughts on how the Gezi Park utopia took place around 20 days in the Gezi community and how it can turn into reality. In this utopia where people belonging to different political opinions lived through during this period in a non-hierarchical but structure-based organization, they could perform communicative and deliberative negotiation processes in solidarity. This storm of experiences, thoughts and knowledge of Gezi Park, were also stated in the voice of women and LGBT individuals, underpinning the importance of assembly of bodies and learning process for emancipation.

¹³ Masculinity is translated from Erk'ek. In Turkish, ERKEK means male/man and ERK means power/force. In general, in gender discourse, it is written as ERK'EK in order to emphasize the problematic root and relation between man and power.

Voices in-situ: testimonies from protestors¹⁴

The narratives and personal convictions recounted by some of the women protesters in the interviews not only depict their personal motivations, but also highlight the different, but common remarks on collectivity, solidarity and hope for the future. They, moreover, express the importance of being politicized bodies on the streets by heralding and celebrating their collective action in solidarity. To listen to one of the witnesses who identifies as feminist:

“It is a good dynamic in the park. People feel strong now. [...] I get a good motivation. In future we will clearly say NO if something wrong happens. As women, we felt more pressure in the society. We experience this often. We, as women, know what does not being heard mean.” (Hatice, age 35)

Elif, a young student protestor, who had not participated in any political action before, similarly states:

“I feel so good when I see people here with great solidarity.[...] We are fighting for freedom here. Besides the feeling of freedom I felt the first time in my life that I am fighting for something. [...]I am here. To feel that I am here with my body gives me power.” (Elif, age 20)

Likewise, another protestor, Nur, with an apolitical past, touches upon the aforementioned police violence functioning as “moral shocks”, as well as the magnitude of resisting in the public space with other political bodies:

“Right now, on the 16th day of the occupation, I feel that the violence from the police is getting more aggressive. [...] Whenever we thought that the police was not able to attack because so many people were around, we saw that the police was violent and that it did not matter that so many people were resisting. [...] Now I feel no fear because so many people are here. No fear. We also learnt how to deal with teargas.” (Nur, age 29)

She continues by emphasizing the power of collective action not only in terms of diversity of identities, but also the empowerment it gives to resist:

¹⁴ Four of the following interviews were made by one of us in Gezi Park during the occupation. The total number of respondents was 61; 50 of whom were recorded textually, while 11 recorded with an audio recorder. The real names of the interviewees are confidential.

“Before I never felt that I am a part of something or of a political group or of an opinion. But what happens in this park is more than to be just a member of a political group. It is amazing. All political groups and people with different opinions are in this park. I feel like I have to be here. I am not able to fight on the barricades but I want to be here and try to stay here. I feel hope in the air. People surround me have hopes. I think people are here because they think that change is possible.” (Nur, age 29)

The enunciations from one of the student insurgents, despite her self-identification as “being not political”, are significant to understand the both moral and physical aspect of participating in construction of collective identity:

“I am on the street, because it is important to gather, because we are talking about human rights, freedom, expression, ideas, future, being together. [...] I think what is going on here is the act of systematizing violence and overawing people...physically and emotionally. [...] But I feel so good in the park. We were all participating of a minor revolution here. Everyone is together...very good mood...very hopeful...happy [...] It was so beautiful in the air. Freedom, smiling with everybody, helping each other...taking and giving all the time...” (Özge, age 26)

As Hunt and Benford (2004:439) states that “the physical body is the vehicle for experiencing reality, it is an essential component of personal and social identities”, she similarly continues:

“It is also physical. You feel inside your body. [...] It feels so good, but difficult to explain. There is no fear to speak, no fear to act, no fear to be here...being yourself with other people in full of respect.” (Özge, age 26)

In addition to the foregoing interviews testifying the motivation and solidarity, people who similarly expressed their feelings in different media should be taken into account, too. For instance, Birgül as one of the protesters from feminist groups puts her experience into the words by explaining that:

“We, as feminists, pitched our tents in the Gezi Park. [...] During this process, women in the Park whom we regard as ‘apolitical’ expressed their critiques about restrictive discourses of the left to feminists. We would have called those women as ‘disorganized’, but they had a completely different way of organizing that we were not able to conceive. As feminists, we questioned ourselves, and then, personally I clearly understood that it is not possible anymore to move forward by using the outdated ways” (Kızıldağ and Sebik, 2013: 24).

This statement above depicts a crucial shift for the women's movement in Turkey. Even the collision between separatist feminists and radical feminists that includes or excludes LGBT groups was taken into account and re-evaluated for the future politics of women. Throughout the Gezi revolts, the boundaries between politics of space and gender movements vanished.

Similar change that LGBT people availed of is equally crucial to pay attention for the history of the movement in Turkey, especially in terms of their visibility and acknowledgment in the greater scale. One of the protestors states this paradigm shift thus:

“We reclaimed this space together, and moreover, the solidarity has overcome the prejudices. When we first arrived at Taksim Square, we were around 60-70 people with our LGBT flag. There have been around 100.000 people giving applauses to us and singing the slogan “there is no salvation alone: either all or none of us.” (Kızıldağ and Sebik, 2013: 23)

Furthermore, the period of non-hierarchical but structure-based organization is described from the perspective of the LGBT activists within their groups:

“During the Gezi Park resistance, the resistance and solidarity table that was built by mobilized and immobilized LGBT individuals –called as LGBT block - was formed with its own dynamic. LGBT people, who have not had any interactions or any social, class or cultural common ground before, gathered under the same roof of resistance.” (Deniz, Özlem, and Yalçın, 2013: 31)

Another testimony lays stress on not only the solidarity among LGBT groups, but also how importance it was to gather in the space of appearance in order to be empowered and create a new kind of “life”, identity and stance against the power:

“LGBT was another group that never left the ranks since the beginning of the resistance by taking place in the barricades, in Istiklal Street and against the water cannons. Only some days after we had been announced as ‘sick’ by the national assembly, we were on the streets with an accumulated exasperation of being ignored and stigmatized. Since the day we retrieved the Park from the police and started building a new life, we got to know each other; and we enjoyed acting together and feeling free. The more free we felt, the more we proliferated and took strength from each other. Gezi happened to be a nonesuch space of encounter for us.” (Deniz, Özlem, and Yalçın, 2013: 29)

All the first-hand and common accounts above accentuated by protestors demonstrate not only the unifying and strengthening spirit of Gezi Park resistance, but also their consciousness of the change both in their political

bodies and their relation to others. Furthermore, it is significant to stress the collective actions, implacable resistance and new creative strategies; especially among women, LGBT people and young generations who finally acquired this long awaited stimulation and transformed it into political act. Bayram Mısır beatifically heralds this new form of 'beyond-identities' mobilization as 'beyond-age' possibility by reminding also the empowering atmosphere of the protests and the creative solidarity:

“Not only the multitudes that are already parts of certain fan groups, but also the generation of 15-25-year-old who participated to such action for the first time embellished this ‘carnival’ with their characteristics so much that their creativity and saying “intelligence versus tear gas” became the motto of June.” (Bayram Mısır, 2013: 19)

Reflections: envisioning the future

The aforementioned extreme violence and attacks from the police during Gezi Revolts once more substantiated that the state, as an outright manifestation of men's interest (Mackinnon, 1982), cannot cope with freedom, therefore it always creates control mechanisms over the bodies, especially bodies that do not represent the male-identity and dominative power (Gambetti, 2013). In Gezi Park protests this control has gone beyond insomuch as that the state attacked the bodies by using all possible apparatus; thus what was left was only body politics. To recall Butler once again:

“[...] to attack the body is to attack the rights itself, since the right is precisely what is exercised by the body on the street.” (Butler, 2011: 4)

Gezi Park, notwithstanding, was one of the unique examples in this instance because women and LGBT people were on the street at fronts, acting with their own agency and without leaving their space for men-defenders. Hereby, they exercised exactly what Butler propounded for politics: they gathered, stayed together without knowing each other, created a gap in balance with interaction, actualized their appearance and engendered their space of politics and politics of space where popular sovereignty took over state sovereignty (Butler, 2013).

Apart from the activity of gathering in the public space *per se*, what protestors experienced justified the invalidity of ostensible 'democratic participation' and 'representative democracy' which only exist in the ballot boxes according to Erdoğan. Women and LGBT groups, who have been the subjects of this claim for so long, proved and corroborated in Gezi Revolts that direct political participation is possible, because they witnessed the immediate reactions and reflections to their claims in that very time and space. Moreover, as also stated in their testimonies, their power and action expanded and spread itself to other bodies which paved the way for “collective identity” via “emotional investment”

which enabled them to “recognize themselves” (Melucci, 1988: 343) together. Thousands of bodies gathered on the streets instead of staying in private realms despite the extreme violence and the various suppressive forces while political gesture was surging (Lambert, 2013); therefore, we believe that it is a great fountain head of upcoming strategies for gender groups in their politics.

Without being besotted with the euphoric optimism of this solidarity, gender groups now should bear what happened in mind, reflect upon and develop new strategies for future politics whilst remembering ongoing state oppression. They should ponder over the question of how new knowledge of being a big collective organism can enable gender groups to create new realms outside the institutional politics. As Polletta and Jasper stress that “collective identity can move us beyond some theoretical impasses,” (2001: 298) this hope of reaching beyond the theory and impasse of existing politics is also expressed in the interviewees’ answers to the question of “what will happen next?” accompanied by their beliefs on the solidarity:

“People will remain brave. The government is making decisions, but these are not the decisions of the people in the Park. The situation at the moment is much better than expectations about how it would end.” (Hatice, age 35)

Another interviewee goes further to suggest new models of mobilization that could be visible and legitimate by confronting state politics:

“Maybe we need representatives in the parliament. We need a new kind of association...a new kind of organization.” (Nur, age 29)

Whether developing this recent gender solidarity into an institutional politics or not, it is vital to sustain this collective consideration and to use it in organizational level for reclaiming the restrained rights and for supporting ‘sister’ activist groups despite their different micro-ideologies. Therefore, we behold that this new way of collective politicization would take gender and sexuality politics in Turkey to a step further which is more inclusive, immune to various forms of state intimidation and straightforward. It has potential not only to continue threading new solidarities amongst different women’s and LGBT groups as new encounters for conservative state, but also to expand the territories of body politics to miscellaneous realms of struggle such as ethnicity, class and religion as the other subjects for ‘space of appearance’.

Although we are wary of the necessity of fair amount of optimism, we would like to go further and claim that such practices of mobilization, empowerment and moments of solidarity can cross the borders and be envisioned in other countries that have recently experienced/are yet to experience similar uprisings. Through exchanging knowledge via available media, the Gezi revolts can be conveyed to and become inspiration for other women and LGBT people under

other oppressive regimes and neoliberal sexual politics - from Middle East to Latin America and to Europe. With an everlasting hope that people in collectivity and solidarity with belief could overcome the political and social barriers together, experience and knowledge which are greater than borders can be transformed into greater long-term strategies that can bring about new gender and sexual activism we imagine.

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