Article

Gezi Movement and the Networked Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis in Global Context

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Abstract

The article draws on Gezi protests that took place in Turkey during the summer of 2013, inquiring the extent to which they were part of a global cycle of contention that has shocked the world the last 5 years. In this regard, concepts and constructs of social movement, new media, networking, and public sphere provide analytical tools to probe into the area. Issues that are addressed and critically discussed include the evaluation of the contemporary protest movements in terms of the global diffusion of neoliberal capitalism, the intersection of social media and collective action, and the critical reflection on the interplay between physical and mediated facets of action.

Keywords

protests, Turkey, social media, Habermas, agora

Introduction

During recent years, various social actors have been mobilized and organized collectively across different parts of the world along with the enlargement of communication networks, taking to the streets and occupying public spaces. Indicative here are the protest movements of 2011—the Arab Spring (Egypt, Tunisia, and other Middle East and North African [MENA] countries), European movements (Spain, Portugal, and Greece), Occupy movement (the United States)—onward (Nigeria, South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria in 2012; Brazil, Turkey, Colombia, Ukraine in 2013; Venezuela, Hong Kong, Hungary, Thailand in 2014; and France, Brazil, Malaysia, Chile in 2015).

Numerous approaches toward contemporary diverse protest movements evaluate them as facets of a universal spirit of resistance, manifested in different times and places, as "cycles of contention" (Tarrow, 1994), while employing a combination of offline (interpersonal, physical) and online (Internet-based) practices, enhancing the "repertoires of contention" (Tilly, 1978). The development of this spirit of resistance has been acknowledged on the grounds of the perspective (against neoliberal global capitalism), the dimension (mediated, networked), and the qualities (participatory, discursive practices) of these movements.

Nevertheless, a more ambiguous contesting terrain is revealed when we focus on the specific contexts of implementation of these movements, pointing out antagonisms in the economic, political, ideological structures of each society, and the relevance of pre-existing repertoires of action and collective imaginations. Along these lines, the article juxtaposes the main aspects (perspective, dimension, and qualities) of the evaluation of a common, global wave of contention to domestic, structural elements that have influenced the emergence of the Gezi movement.

The article first highlights the relevance of the Gezi protests to the recent wave of uprisings. Then, it discusses approaches that evaluate these protest movements as reactions to the global diffusion of neoliberal capitalism, and puts the Gezi movement into perspective, pointing out historical and political dimensions of the Gezi movement that distinguish it from others. From this point of view, the article shifts the focus from the determining networked nature of social media to the interplay between physical and mediated facets of action, critically drawing on the idea of the public sphere.

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Gezi Movement: The Relevance to the Recent Wave of Uprisings

The violent handling of a peaceful ecological sit-in of residents of Istanbul on 28 May 2013, against governmental plans to demolish Taksim Square's Gezi Park for the reconstruction of the 19th century Ottoman Artillery Barracks, sparked the riots that shook Turkey during the summer of that year:

> Triggered by violent police crackdown and precipitated by Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdoğan's defiant and polarizing rhetoric, the demonstrations quickly spread to other cities (there had been more than 200 protests in 67 cities across the country by 3 June, . . ., turning Gezi into a hub of diverse grievances, mostly directed at what was widely perceived as the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) growing "authoritarian" tendencies. (Özkırımlı, 2014, p. 2)

The Gezi protest movement shares many features with 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, revealed also on associated descriptions of the events and practices—"Turkish Spring," "#OccupyGezi." The locus of Gezi resistance, Taksim square, symbolizes, just like the ones of the 2011 protests (Tahrir, Puerta de Dol, Syntagma), the mass protests of the country:

> Taksim, which literally means "allocation," has long been the central place from where water has been distributed to different neighborhoods of the city since the 18th century, and carried therefore, both an ontological and a symbolic significance as the urban core of Istanbul . . . Throughout the 20th century, Taksim square, Gezi Park and their immediate environs continued to be a symbolic battleground between state gestures of architectural control and discipline, official ceremonies of state spectacle, creeping urban commercialization especially with hotel constructions, and memorable demonstrations, acts of resistance, and state (military/police) violence in 1960s and 1970s. (Harmanşah, 2014, pp. 126, 127; citing also Baykan & Hatuka, 2010)

The fusion of various social actors of diverse ideological backgrounds in a collective subject, the "multitude" in Hardt and Negri's (2004)—some of them participating for the first time in activist practices—was also evident in the Gezi movement:

> The people in the park and the square have not been part of a unified social formation before. Many had never taken part in a demonstration. Some thought of themselves as "apolitical." Other who belonged to social movements and groups had never sat side by side with the multiple other groups represented in the park . . . surprising encounters between feminists and football fans, secularists and anti-capitalist Muslims, members of Istanbul's bourgeoisie and the working class. LGBT activists and professional lawyers, Kurds and Jews. (Navaro-Yashin, 2013, section 1, para. 8)

Moreover, the employment of social networking sites (in addition to older web applications and Internet tools) along with the use of mobile media has been a common characteristic of the recent protest movements, facilitating their mobilization and/or organization. Social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, contributed, to a certain extent, to the diffusion of calls, ideas, practices, and actions among protesters at both the national and the transnational level:

> In response to traditional media's acceptance of the hegemony of the current government, citizens have not only come to use alternative communication channels, but to celebrate them as well. Mainly using Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Vine, people have given pluralist accounts of the events using creative slogans. Databases have been created to collect evidence of police brutality and the compiled documents have been distributed via blogs, open folksonomies (such as Eksisozluk) and other mass communication platforms. (Alternatif Bilişim Derneği, 2013, section 2, para. 1)

Another obvious similarity of the recent protest movements has been the physical occupation of public spaces and the development of discursive practices in protest camps, generating alternative visions of democracy. These spaces provided dynamic sites of interaction, along with informal gatherings, group meetings, and general assemblies of people from diverse backgrounds and orientations. Social actors engaged in processes of collective decision making and participatory democratic practice in general and experimented creatively with self-organized projects:

> [i]n addition to regular set of action in most protest movements, such as chanting slogans, sit-ins, graffiti, carrying posters, struggling with the police, Gezi protesters deployed an unusually broad range of tactics in their tent city featuring an infirmary, a play-ground, an organic vegetable farm, a botanical garden, a mobile transmitter for free wi-fi connection, a speaker's corner, a performance stage, a fire station, a free library, a revolution museum, open lectures, wish tree and many more components of a self-sufficient commune life. (Örs & Turan, 2015, p. 455)

Finally, common traits among contemporary mobilizations can be traced in several reference points of their political contention (symbols, discourses, and practices). During the mass demonstrations in 2011, a kind of snowball inspiration was revealed on the respective campaigns—for protesters in Tahrir square in Egypt "Tunisia was the solution," while American activists were looking for their "Tahrir moment" when they addressed their call for action. At the same time, flags of other countries in resistance appeared on the streets during demonstrations expressing solidarity with relevant struggles; transnational slogans were echoing common concerns; and banners were used to register claims, declarations among activists in different countries (Spanish Indignados "invited" Greeks to get out to the streets, and Greeks responded accordingly). In a similar way,

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. (Ertür, 2014, p. 1)

On the grounds of these characteristics, it has been quite common to group Gezi mobilizations together with the uprisings that took place in different times and places across the world during the past few years, as parts of a global wave of resistance.

A Global Wave of Resistance?

Several accounts of recent protests categorize them into the same cluster of resistant movements. Paul Mason (2012) identified a "new sociological type" at the heart of these protests, "the graduate with no future," as well as a new conveyor of them, the social media. The politics of social issues (unemployment, poverty) has returned to the agenda, and the subject is the well-educated unemployed youth experimenting with new media technologies. Does this signal the emergence of another paradigm of social movements (after the traditional workers' movements and the "new" social movements of students, feminists, environmentalists, etc.) (Vatikiotis & Yörük, 2013)? The main context for the evaluation of the formation of a new wave of global mobilization has been the shortcomings of neoliberal capitalism, marked in various ways across diverse settings—"neoliberalism is not a single logic with a single expression" (Butler, 2014, p. xiii).

Hardt and Negri (2012), drawing on the crisis of neoliberalism and the diverse subject positions it produces (indebted, mediatized, securitized, and represented), point out the capacity of the relevant dominated figures to change into figures/subjectivities of power along with the "declaration" of new principles (providing the basis of the constitution of another type of society). The social struggles that took place during 2011 across the world (from the North African rebellions to the encampments in Europe and the United States) have been singular ones, "oriented toward specific local conditions" (against repressive regimes, austerity measures, the finance tyranny), but plural ones upon their communication, speaking to one another and having a clear vision—"they can hold together without contradiction their singular conditions and local battles with the common global struggle" (section 1, para. 8). According to Žižek (2013), what unites the diverse protests around the world is that they are reactions against different facets of capitalist globalization. Still, none of these protests can be reduced to a single issue; they deal with a specific combination of at least two issues, one economic (from corruption to inefficiency to capitalism itself), the other politico-ideological (from the demand for democracy to the demand that conventional multi-party democracy be overthrown).

Along the same lines, the interpretation of protests as parts of a novel, international cycle of contention by Tejerina, Perugorría, Benski, and Langman (2013) reads on protest movements that have emerged since 2011 in reference to the increasing and widespread social and economic levels of inequality. From this point of view, they point out the global dimensions of the relevant mobilizations, acknowledging at the same time that the resistance to the global diffusion of neoliberal capitalism has had regional and local expressions, as they are articulated in the specific socioeconomic and political contests. "[T]hese various *occupy social movements*, with their protests, demonstrations and occupations of public space should be seen as diverse instantiations of *an international cycle of contention against social and economic inequality*" (p. 381, emphasis in the original). Similarly, della Porta and Mattoni (2014) explain the recent protest movements on the grounds of the global economic and political crisis that has affected many countries in the world to some extent. Contemporary protest movements, originated in the crisis ("movements of the crisis"), while differing in their features, are nonetheless linked to one another, sharing visions, frames, and repertoires of action. The diffusion of protest imageries and practices across different countries is indicative of the transnational dimension in the recent wave of global protests (which has begun since 2008 in Iceland). Still, this is not the first time of experiencing global mobilizations against the crisis. Twelve years before "2011 uprisings," the protests against World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle set a remarkable precedent for transnational activist (the formation of the global justice movement). Comparing the two global waves of protests, della Porta (2012) traces continuities and discontinuities among them. On one hand, both waves of protests "focus on another democracy"; on the other hand, the "form of their transnationalization" has taken reverse roots (from the transnational to the national in the first wave of protests; from the national to the transnational in the second one).

Gezi Into Perspective

The Gezi protests need to be perceived as the moment of eruption of a series of accumulated social discontents.

The background of these issues lies in recent history, in the ruling AKP's journey from a democratic reformist party to an authoritarian power. The AKP was formed in 2001 as the moderate wing of the movement of political Islam in Turkey. Their program consisted of the democratization of the regime with a perspective of joining the European Union (EU). They won the 2002 elections and have ruled Turkey since then. Although in office, AKP and its leader Tayyip Erdoğan played the underdog for a long time, struggling against the conventional republican structures of military-bureaucratic tutelage. The power struggle within the Turkish political establishment further intensified around the issue of the presidential election in 2007. Defying the Military's

threats of intervention, AKP insisted on the appointment of its candidate, Abdullah Gül, as the first Islamist President of the Turkish Republic.

Having gained the upper hand in the intra-state power struggle, AKP liquidated all the elements of conventional military-bureaucratic structures through a number of mass trials. The regime of tutelage, that performed the role of checks and balances over Turkey's political establishment throughout the 20th century, thus faded away, along with this "ancien regime's" Kemalist ideology, the logic of which systematically denied Islamic political subjectivity any degree whatsoever of participation in republican power structures. The AKP presented this liquidation as the end of Turkey's "deep state" and democratization of Turkish political establishment, obtaining unprecedented popular support in the ballot box. Turkey's political adjustment to the EU criteria was going hand in hand with the liquidation of the "ancien regime" and was appreciated by the Western democracies and the EU authorities. In parallel with these political developments, full integration of Turkey's economy with the global capitalist structures, through a series of neoliberal measures, was also implemented.

Neoliberalism has been successfully institutionalized and established its ideology in Turkey since 2002, but there are significant differences in the context of its implementation (moderate Muslim democracy) and the securitarian logic (authoritarianism) employed. As Judith Butler (2014) observes,

> though we might be tempted to say that Turkey is but a case study in the analysis of neoliberal securitarian states, we would perhaps be overlooking the specifically historical and political dimensions of that protest movement that distinguish it significantly from others. (p. vii)

In order to make this peculiarly Turkish dimension intelligible, the authoritarian conservative turn of the ruling AKP, particularly from 2007 onward, needs to be considered further.

Secular Population Versus Islamist Authoritarianism

The AKP project, which was originally presented as democratization, peace, economic development, and active participation in global politics, has been interpreted since 2007 by more and more sectors of Turkish society as an authoritarian project, which accommodates strong tendencies of de-secularization of the state, Islamization of society, neoliberalization of the economy, destruction of the natural environment and Middle-Easternization of foreign affairs. This interpretation was vindicated by a series of events in the run up to the Gezi protests.

AKP's education reform of 2012 consisted not of democratization but Islamization of the national curriculum. Compulsory religious instruction in secular schools was

maintained and the primary and secondary educational institutions were turned into religious schools. Moreover, restrictions were imposed on alcohol consumption; the then Prime Minister Erdoğan demanded that each family must have at least three children and instructed district governors to prevent the mixed accommodation of male and female students in student houses. Misogynist statements by top government figures went hand in hand with a steady increase in "honor killings" and incidents of violence against women. In the everyday speeches of government figures, including Erdoğan in particular, secular identity was systematically externalized and demonized, as the "other" of the "proper" Turkish identity. With these practices, AKP's stance moved further from the de-secularization of the State to a position suitable of being interpreted as an attempt of imposition of conservatism or forced Islamization of society. Being subjected to these policies, sentiments of dissent and resentment grew among large sectors of society, who felt that their conventionally secular and modern lifestyle was threatened by an Islamist monoparty regime.

GENAR's research showed that the majority of protesters (33.5%) defined themselves as "Ataturkist," and an additional 6.1% "Secularistic." This almost 40% core is followed by 19% "libertarian" and 12.4% "social democrat" (Arslan, Arslan, Sezer, & Sezer, 2014, p. 81). Ataturkism is another name of the Kemalist ideology, the official ideology of the secular republic.

Modern secular identity formed an all-embracing political frontier behind which most of the existing discontents and political subjectivities gathered to formulate and articulate their demands.

Social Discontents and Political Subjectivities

The secularist "reaction" contained in itself a plurality of reactions from all walks of society, who participated in the protests by raising a plurality of demands. Below is a list of the most visible forms of this discontent, identities and demands, in their relationship to the Gezi protests, including the labor movement; ecological movement; the urban poor youth activism; middle-class youth activism; Alevi identity; soccer fans; women; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transsexual (LGBTT) movement; and the Kurdish movement.

Labor and Oppressive Neo-Liberal Reconstruction. The AKP-led neoliberalization of the Turkish economy has not brought about a restoration of labor rights to unionize and participate in collective bargaining. On the contrary, deterioration in job security and decreasing access to free health and education have been the main features of AKP's labor policies. In these conditions, the ranks of the Turkish "precariat" have swollen as in many European and Middle Eastern societies. The disillusionment of the working masses and the left reached their peak with the closure of Taksim Square to 1 May 2013

demonstrations, an affair that occurred only weeks prior to the Gezi uprising. Consequently, leftwing trade unions including DISK (Revolutionary Trade Unions Confederation) and KESK (Public Sector Trade Unions Confederation) were both involved in the Gezi protests, declaring industrial strikes and calling their membership to the squares around the country.

"Right to the City" and Green Activism. The growth of the Turkish economy in recent years has relied mainly on the energy and construction sectors. The expansion of the energy sector through the proliferation of hydroelectric power plants, thermal power plants, and mining sites had disastrous environmental consequences, sparking sustained protests by environmental activists and local communities around the country. Two projects of building nuclear power stations in the north and south of the country were also contracted out to Japanese and Russian companies in defiance of fierce environmental objections. The construction sector, on the other hand, has developed to destroy the aesthetic and architectural integrity of the major cities. Three large-scale construction projects in and around Istanbul, including the third Bosphorus bridge, the third Istanbul airport, and the planned construction of a canal in Thrace to bypass the Bosphorus, along with the building of a gigantic Presidential Palace in Ankara had been objected by urban activists and architects prior to the Gezi protests. Cutting "a few trees" for a project to destroy Gezi Park in Taksim Square to build a replica of historic army barracks was therefore only the tip of a giant iceberg, which triggered the Gezi protests.

"The Uprooted" Urban Poor and Youth Activism. In addition to environmental and urban activists, the already politicized youth of the urban poor also participated en masse in Gezi protests. Since the 1970s, Turkey's radical left has increasingly found fertile grounds among the poor quarters of major cities, which have been formed and expanded through continuous rural-urban migration. The urban poor's participation is due, along with the existing and deteriorating economic injustices, to the recent gentrification policies, which meant the poor communities' removal from city centers. The discontent of the urban poor, under pressure from political authority to leave their traditional habitus in city centers, has been one of the elements that fueled the Gezi protests.

Social Media Censorship and the Frustrated Youth. The tangible government supervision over mainstream media has been another issue among the causes of the Gezi protests. The supervision was maintained through subjecting those media groups refusing to adopt a pro-government line toward harsh measures of financial inspection. Many renowned journalists have lost their positions in the mainstream media, and some have been imprisoned. Due to the lack of free mass media, social media emerged as an option for freedom of expression, but the government imposed censorship and restrictions on the use of the Internet. These authoritarian measures against the freedom of communication have become a major concern particularly of the youth, who are the largest sector of social media users. There have been demonstrations demanding freedom of communication in 2013 prior to the Gezi protests, which have been terrorized, mocked, and demonized by the political authorities.

The Syrian Civil War, Sunni Authoritarianism, Selefi Terrorism, and the Alevi Identity. These domestic moves toward an authoritarian conservative monoparty rule took place against the background of the Arab Spring beyond the southern borders and a wave of protest movements (of "Occupy" and "Indignados") beyond the western borders of Turkey, amid claims of a "shift of axis" in the government's foreign policy orientations from the EU to the Middle East. The AKP, along with some Gulf States like Qatar, tried to play the role of the "big brother" of various fanatical Islamist groups around the Middle East, and most recently in Syria. The Turkish government's stance in the Syrian civil war was not welcomed by the Alevis, who form around a quarter of Turkey's population. The Syrian civil war was perceived by Turkey's Alevi masses as a sectarian conflict initiated by the Sunni Islamist groups against the only State of the world with an Alevi identity (Syria). Turkey's official involvement with fanatical Sunni groups contained the potential of the expansion of the conflict inside Turkey.

Alevi identity was further humiliated with President Gül's baptizing on 29 May 2013 of the third bridge on the Bosphorus as Yavuz Sultan Selim bridge. Yavuz is a 17th century Ottoman Sultan infamous for the mass murder of the Alevis in Anatolia. Behind these symbolic and violent occurrences lie the demands of Turkey's Alevis for recognition of their temples (Cemevi) as the equals of mosques and the exemption of their children from compulsory Sunni religious instruction at schools, both of which have been systematically denied by the government. The Alevi masses' participation in Gezi protests around the country was remarkable in that out of the eight youngsters killed during the protests, seven were Alevis.

Soccer Fans, Women, LGBTT, and the Kurds. Soccer fans, particularly the Beşiktaş fans organized in Çarşı group, were another significant group of activists during the Gezi protests. Soccer fans found a channel to express their frustration with the Turkish police in this uprising. The gay-lesbian movement and women's organizations were also present in the Gezi protests. The Kurds, on the other hand, despite being the best organized social movement in Turkey, were understandably reluctant in their participation. Interestingly, however, the Kurdish movement managed to seize the opportunity to open itself up to large sectors of Turkish youth and Turkish left in the wake of Gezi protests. Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was founded as an umbrella organization to provide a political platform to all shades of political opposition ("Portre: Sırrı süreyya önder," 2014), and in the June

2015 general elections, the HDP managed to go over the 10% national threshold to be represented by 80 deputies in the new Parliament. Half of the HDP deputies are women, and almost all the ethnic and religious groups, along with trade union and gay-lesbian organizations, have their deputies under the HDP umbrella. With these features, the HDP project can be read as an expression of "the Gezi spirit" and of that political will to unite the fate of the Kurdish liberation with the libertarian aims of Turkish social movements.

Overall, the Gezi uprising was a comprehensive expression of various existing and deepening antagonisms. Among them, the polarization between Islamism and secularism can be identified as the most visible of these antagonisms. Beneath this surface, however, there are a number of significant structural issues, including the consolidation of neoliberal policies, centralization of power (along with allegations of cronyism and authoritarianism), urban gentrification and environmental destruction, and a neo-Ottomanist shift of orientation in foreign affairs. The accumulation of these social discontents and the popular weariness from more than a decade of one party rule, Gezi was the expression of the hope for change in Turkish politics.

Networked Movements?

The determining role of social media in the recent uprisings has been greatly acknowledged. The old slogan of the 1970s "The Revolution will not be televised" was transformed into "The Revolution will be Twitted" in the 2010s.

Castells (2012), among others, draws on the Egyptian uprising, Indignados in Spain, and the Occupy Movement in the United States, and evaluates them as "networked social movements," attributing liberating characteristics to the nature of their structure. "Horizontality is the norm, and there is little need for leadership because the coordination functions can be exercised by the network itself through interaction between its modes" (p. 129). Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) point out that network organizational pattern entails further forms of engagement in contemporary contentious politics. Drawing broadly on digitally enabled action networks, they evaluate the "logic of connective action," acknowledging both organizationally enabled, hybrid networks and technology-enabled, self-organizing networks (such as Arab Spring uprisings, the Indignados, and Occupy protests): "In this network mode, political demands and grievances are often shared in very personalized accounts that travel over social networking patterns, email lists, and online coordinating platforms" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 742).

However, protests are performed in the vibrant terrain of the streets. The intersection of offline (occupation of public spaces) and online (social media) forms of political participation and mobilization is a regular feature of contemporary protest movements. Respectively, several approaches draw on the interplay between social and media activism across the co-articulation of physical/offline and digital/online practices. Jurgenson (2012) points out how the "digital and physical enmesh to form an augmented reality":

> It is this massive implosion of atoms and bits that has created an augmented reality where the advantages of digitality—information spreads faster, more voices become empowered, enhanced organization and consensus capabilities—intersect with the importance of occupying physical space with flesh-and-blood bodies. (p. 86)

Moving broadly in the same zone, Gerbaudo (2012) pays attention to Tahrir, Puerta del Sol, and Zuccotti as physical and symbolic places, highlighting the construction of a "choreography of assembly," where social media had a key role in choreographing protests—"facilitating the gatherings of participants in public space, and generating an emotional tension toward participation" (section 4, para. 4).

Further issues are raised here in regard to the practices developed through these protests and the challenges they convey for the enhancement and enrichment of the democratic process. The notable enlargement of representation and participation of diverse social actors in the episodes of contention, the increasing dissemination of information, alternative viewpoints and arguments, and the exercise of participatory, discursive practices (consensual decision making, decentralized assemblies, mutual aid networks, etc.) rejuvenated the discussion on deliberative democracy. On one hand, Habermas' (1989) concept of "public sphere" has provided a consistent framework for the evaluation of civic engagement/participation in representative democracies. The ideal of public sphere has gradually informed the role of the new media, too, and it has been emphatically reconstituted along its interplay with civil society in interventionist terms. For Celikates (2015), digital publics and digital contention amount to a new structural transformation of the public sphere:

> [T]his process is an essentially open social and political process involving multiple arenas and spheres whose form and results are essentially contested and part of political struggles that take place in the public sphere as much they are about the public sphere and produce it in the course of such contestation. (p. 172)

On the other hand, the growing embodiment of deliberative democracy in city center main squares broadens the constitution of the realm of civic engagement beyond the limited field of the public sphere, recalling the idea of the ancient Greek *agora* instead, as an agonistic terrain of the everyday politics of self-expression.

Legacy Mass Media Versus New Social Media in Gezi

The Gezi protest developed as a networked movement due to both the availability of the new communication technologies for the protesters and the inconsistencies of the conventional

mass media. During the protests, new digital mediums, particularly the social media channels, were escalated to the status of the major source of information and the primary devices of communication.

The Mainstream mass media, including primarily the TV channels and daily newspapers, fell under government pressure when deciding on the coverage or not of the Gezi uprising. This is true for the TV channels and newspapers of Doğan Media Group, along with other relatively independent mainstream outlets of the time, such as Habertürk and NTV. The pro-government mainstream, on the other hand, chose to ignore the incidents initially and, when this became impossible, launched an orchestrated disinformation and defamation campaign against the protesters. Full coverage was only observed in those TV channels and newspapers that had already been positioned outside of the mainstream, namely, Halk TV, Ulusal Kanal, and Hayat TV, and the newspapers BirGün, Evrensel, and Aydınlık.

Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Board (RTUK), an institution with the authority to issue penalties, has always been a governmental apparatus for the control of independent and dissident media. The non-mainstream media was penalized heavily during Gezi, by being fined and closed down.[1] There was more auto-censorship in the mainstream media than overt government intervention as such. The popular history magazine *NTV Tarih* got closed down by its administration because it was preparing a special issue on the Gezi Park protests ("NTV Tarih," 2013). According to the Turkish Journalists Union (TGS), at least 22 journalists have been fired and 37 forced to resign over their coverage of the Gezi Park protests ("Turkish Journalists Fired Over," 2013). In addition to the RTUK threat, the independent mainstream also had financial concerns due to their ownership structures and the consequent links with investments and business contracts in other industries, all of which require maintenance of good relations with the government. As a result, instead of covering Taksim Square and the demonstrations around the country, the mainstream as a whole chose to broadcast food programs, documentaries, and entertainment programs.[2] In return, demonstrators protested in front of media buildings, leading to the resignation of a chief editor on 3 June ("Doğuş Media CEO Takes Leave Amid Media Criticism," 2013) and campaigned for the boycott of mainstream media.[3]

After almost a week of silence, amid protest demonstrations and criticism from international media, the independent mainstream outlets began to report and broadcast the incidents. About the same time, the strongest wing of the mainstream, that is, the pro-government TV channels and newspapers, commenced their biased coverage, blaming all violence on demonstrators. They also launched an orchestrated defamation campaign against demonstrators, accusing them of having orgies in the park (Sabah, 2013) and drinking parties in a mosque,[4] and assaulting headscarfed women.[5]

The suppression of the dissident media, the self-censorship of the independent mass media, and the disinformation campaign of the pro-government media led to a deep mistrust among the population at large toward the legacy media, who, while physically experiencing the events or witnessing them with their own eyes, could not see any reflection particularly in the mainstream media outlets. The emerging gap was filled by social media, by Twitter in particular. As of December 2012, 35% of the Turkish population was using social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2012). Mobile phone and Internet applications were already in use in the organization of the events, among friends, discussion groups, political websites, and so on, that is, they were the major tools of communication. With the lack of news coverage, these social media tools have reached the status of becoming the main source of information, too.

Between 29 May 2013 to 10 June 2013, use of Twitter per day in Turkey increased from 1.8 to 10 million. There were more than 20 hashtags related to the protests that became most popular worldwide trend topics, and among them, six hashtags went over the 1 million messages per day barrier. Social media analysts assert that the total number of tweets regarding the Gezi protests reached more than seven billion. The most popular hashtags were #direngeziparki (resist gezi park) and #occupygezi (Banko & Babaoğlan, 2013, pp. 18–22). One research study shows that of those who participated in demonstrations, 69% followed the events from social media, while only 7% from television (Konda, 2014, p. 74). Protesters who gathered in the Taksim Gezi Park and people living in different parts of Istanbul or Turkey connected through social media and both followed the developments and got organized. Furthermore, to support the protesters in Taksim Gezi Park, many different needs such as shelter, food, human networks, and so on were resolved by organizations through social media communication (Yılmaz & Yılmaz, 2015, p. 2813).

The power of social media can be observed from the government's and pro-government media's reaction. Erdoğan said, "To me, social media is the worst menace to society" (Letsch, 2013). During Gezi, the Internet signal in some parts of Istanbul and other cities was turned off from time to time, although this was not officially admitted. Sixteen people in Izmir and 13 people in Adana were detained and charged with posting provocative comments ("İzmir'de "halkı isyana teşvik" baskınları," 2013). Realizing with Gezi that an Internet shut down and Twitter suppression were not possible in the current state of Turkey, AKP would allegedly form a regiment of highly Internet literate recruits to operate as AKP "trolls" in the social media.

To sum up, social media channels were used as the main medium, that is, both as the main information source and the main communication device, by the protesting masses. This escalation of the new digital mediums to the status of the major sources of information and the primary tools of communication, along with their portrayal by the authoritarian power centers as the primary menace to society, brings about the necessity of discussing the place of social media not only

in social protests but also in the political life of contemporary societies as a whole. Celikates' above-mentioned thesis of a new transformation of the public sphere in the age of digital communication deserves an assessment through a discussion concerning the definitions of the notion of public sphere.

The Return of the Public Sphere?

> In spite of the lack of conscious leadership in the case of spontaneous collective actions of resistance such as riots, revolts or more peaceful actions . . ., it is common ground today that these are actions linked and even led by political matters, have a certain degree of organization, expectations, etc. (Dakoglou, 2012, p. 536)

Accordingly, rather than attributing the very role of social media in the unfolding of protest movements to their technological capacities (networking), it would be more productive to contextualize their significant contribution.

Most of the contemporary protests around the world have occurred in urban squares of the major cities, which is a natural historical tendency for all protest movements throughout history. What is peculiar about the protest movements of our time is the tendency of the masses to occupy and stay in these major squares rather than protesting and then leaving the same day. This is precisely what happened in Wall Street, Tahrir, Taksim, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, and so on. In this sequence of events, the Gezi protests have an exceptional place given that the whole upheaval was sparked off by a disagreement about a government project regarding Taksim Square and Gezi Park in Istanbul's center. This feature has inevitably generated a further discussion that situated the Gezi protests within the context of urbanization and "the right to the city."[6] The occupation of urban space by protesters also brought about a discussion on the meaning of these argumentative spaces for the theory of democracy, in which we shall engage below.

At the outset, it should be recalled that from the government's point of view, the only relationship between the protests and democracy consists of the protesters' desire to overthrow the existing democratic regime. The rather "Schumpeterian" position of the Turkish government, which understands democracy as the mere right to choose a set of politicians to manage society for a certain period, would treat any extra-Parliament attempt of participation in political decisions as a threat to "democracy." This is why the government could claim it a legitimate and "democratic" act to employ all the repressive state apparatuses to quell the protests. When this perception of democracy is left on the other side of the barricades, the argumentative space that has been opened up by the protesters occupying city squares needs to be reflected on regarding the theory of democracy.

Habermas' notions of public sphere and communicative action have been frequently consulted in various attempts to comprehend the possible contribution of these urban spaces to the popular perceptions of democracy. For Habermas (1962/1989), the public sphere, which emerged in saloons of the late 18th century European cities, withered away during the 19th century, being absorbed by mass communication, market forces, and bureaucracies. The consequence of this defeat in our time is the "democratic deficit" observed in Western polities. Such deficits that occur in representative democracies were hoped to be repaired through lobbying and the acts of pressure groups, in classical political theory. However, through time, these lobbies and pressure groups, along with the political parties, also get integrated with the existing political establishments, at the expense of further alienation of the masses from the political process. Consequently, the acknowledgment of an era of "post-representative democracy" (Zukherman, 2014), along with theories of deliberative, agonistic, and radical modes of democracy, has emerged to search for a solution to the questions of politics and democracy in the contemporary world. The notion of public sphere appears to be a relevant topic of discussion in this context. Although Habermas does not propose the reclamation of the public sphere as a solution, his stance can legitimately be read as implying that through rational argumentation and communicative action, the long lost public sphere could be resuscitated.

It is true that during the protests public spheres emerged in the occupied city squares, free to a large extent from the pressures of market forces and bureaucracies. Moreover, institutions of mass communication, the mainstream media in particular, decided, for their own interests, to side with the government in ignoring and undermining the protests. In these circumstances, we have witnessed the return of what Habermas (1984) would call "undistorted communication" in citizen forums, where face to face communication and taking collective decisions have become norms. During this short-lived experience of democracy, not only the legitimacy of the political order was questioned and the neoliberal pressures of urban gentrification were resisted but also the masses were seriously disillusioned about the credibility of mass media institutions. Is it therefore possible to observe the emergence of a tendency in the "global cities" of the 21st century of a return of the public sphere in a Habermasian fashion?

A positive response to this question would not be wrong but would risk overlooking significant dimensions of these argumentative public spaces. First, "the return" does not occur in saloons as in the late 18th century but in city squares, where not a certain community (the bourgeoisie, in Habermas' narrative) but all layers of society freely walk and talk. Second, decisions—not only the political ones such as the formation of delegations to meet the Prime Minister or the assignment of spokespersons with the authority to speak to the press or collective drafting of the manifestos, and so on but also the practical decisions regarding the running of the collective kitchens, installing disposable public toilets, cleaning of the camping ground, the formation of defense

lines against police aggression, decisions to hold the defenses or to retreat, and so on—are all taken through open, face-to-face discussion among all the participants of the protests. These aspects have more of a resemblance more to the ancient traditions of direct democracy. In this sense, it would be more appropriate to claim a return of the ancient Greek *agora* and *ekklesia*. Moreover, these experiences take place behind the barricades, under sustained threat from the police, in war-like conditions, which inevitably evoke memories of the Paris Commune of 1871, rather than the comfortable saloons of some European city. In fact, Marx (1871/1986) observed a similar tendency of direct democracy in the way the communards ran the affairs of the city. As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) pointed out, the "proletarian public sphere" that survived long after Habermas' declaration of the end of the public sphere should not be overlooked. The Gezi experience, along with similar experiences of occupation of city squares, could well be placed within the cannon of this direct democracy tradition.

Finally, according to Richard Rorty (1984), Habermas' notions of communicative action and public sphere are deeply related to a goal of achieving the conditions of undistorted communication, or, as Martin Jay (1989, p. 104) argues, the existence of an "ideal speech community," where face-to-face intersubjectivity among communicators is no longer mediated but direct. In Habermas' negative discourse, the world created by the press was nothing but a "pseudo-public." Examining the Gezi experience, the collective disillusionment with the mass media, particularly the mainstream media institutions, and the decision to participate instead in citizen assemblies in city squares for the expression of political opinion are important steps taken toward the direction of undistorted communication.

The Gezi protests, however, were far from being unmediated as such. On the contrary, where the mainstream media failed, marginal mass media, consisting of an array of far left and Kemalist newspapers and TV channels, and, more importantly, social media stepped in. The use of social media experienced a real boom during the Gezi protests, which was sustained in the aftermath since then. Social media was so effective both in organizing and reporting of the protests that the government had to shut down Twitter for a few days. New legislation was also passed to tighten the control of Internet-based communication and mobile phone networks. The type of media changed but the mediated nature of social action did not. In fact, with the interactive features of the social media, the mediation has become more attractive and greatly increased.

In summary, the restoration of the public sphere in the squares of the global cities of the 21st century takes different forms than its initial emergence as described by Habermas. We observe in the Gezi protests that social media undertook the mission of dissemination of the images and messages of the incidents through reporting (citizen journalism) along with propaganda and the coordination of activist groups through announcements of protest gatherings. In citizen journalism, the boundaries between the reporter and the reported are radically blurred, and using social media itself becomes a form of activism.

Under these conditions, and noting the essential functions that social media played in recent protests, from the 2009 Moldova and Tehran protests to the Occupy movement in the west and the Arab Spring, and from there to the Gezi uprising, the assertion of a new transformation of the public sphere could legitimately be sustained. This transformation, rather than excluding any media from the project of the public sphere in favor of direct and undistorted communication, occurs along with a transformation in communication technologies, with progressively increasing use of social media networks and devices. What is needed is therefore a redefinition of the notion of the public sphere following Charles Taylor's (2002) assertion:

> The public sphere is a central feature of modern society. The public sphere as a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common sense about these. (p. 117)

Conclusion

Common features and trends can be traced among Gezi and other contemporary protest movements concerning their perspective, dimension, and qualities. At the same time, the Gezi movement's accumulation of social discontents and antagonisms in its specific context point out the limitations of considering the Gezi protests as part of the same cycle of contention.

The study has evaluated an array of structural dislocations of the social order that were incorporated in the Gezi movement, from environmental destruction to the aggressive gentrification of urban spaces, from economic hardship to Turkey's aggressive involvement in the Syrian civil war, from the media and social media censorship to the blocked peace process with the Kurdish liberation movement, and so on. Political subjects that these various dislocations produced, including environmental activists, union of architects, trade unions, radical left parties and groups, Alevi associations, soccer fans, feminists, LGBTT activists, secularist organizations such as the "Association to Support the Contemporary Lifestyle," BDP (Peace and Democracy Party, the Kurdish party in the Parliament), secular businessmen, and so on, have literally come together in the actual space of a park to express their particular discontents and to transform these expressions of structural dislocations into collective social demands.

In addition, the mediated and physical facets of action have been considered along with the discontent that prepared the grounds for the development of protests, social demands that

have been incorporated in the discourses of urban resistance, political actors that gathered together in Taksim square, and antagonisms and myths that the movement has generated.

Particular attention has been paid to the claims of the return of the (repressed) public sphere through recent protests. It has been observed that rather than referring to Habermas, the nature of the movement requires a reference to the ancient practices of *phronesis, ekklesia*, and direct democracy. The tendency to launch forums and take collective decisions in the city squares (*agora*) does not occur for the first time in history. In times of revolutionary transformation, similar practices of direct democracy have occurred in history, the most similar historical example being that of the Paris Commune. The other objection to the Habermasian explanations of recent protest movements is the central role played in these movements particularly by the social media. Without social media's mediation, the Gezi protests, like the Occupy movement, Indignados, Arab Spring, Tahrir protests, and so on, could never have been what they are now. In the interactive universe of social media, communication is by no means "undistorted" as such but is always misunderstood, amended, perverted, and amplified through dispersion, participation, and dissemination in diverse groups of communicative action. In Slaatta's (1999, p. 37) words, "Media is an important stream in the manifest of public sphere."

It is therefore argued in conclusion that contemporary protest movements indicate a new transformation of the public sphere, in which the role of the media, and particularly the social media, cannot be excluded but should instead be emphasized.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Halk TV and Ulusal Kanal were fined and Hayat TV was shut down for their extensive coverage of the Gezi protests and through this "harming the physical, moral and mental development of children and young people." The live broadcast from Taksim Square by the foreign media outlets was also criticized by the government, leading to the arrest of CNN International's reporter at one stage ("TV Watchdog Fines Live Streaming," 2013; "Turkish Politicians Slam," 2013).
2. The most famous of these, "the penguin affair," would become a symbol of Gezi: At 1:00 a.m. on 2 June, CNN Turk was broadcasting a documentary on penguins, while CNN International was showing live coverage of the clashes in Taksim Square (Fleishman, 2013).
3. A campaign was started to force CNN International to pull its name franchise from CNN Turk in response to its lack of coverage of the protests.

4. The demonstrators sought refuge from a tear gas assault of the police in the said mosque and were treated by medical doctors. Although the then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan personally declared that they would release video footage of this drinking party, the imam of the mosque denied the allegations and no videos were ever released. Later the imam was exiled to another city (Yeni Şafak, 2013).
5. The most infamous example of this line of disinformation was the claim that around 30 male demonstrators in leather jackets intimidated a pious young mother and that there were visual records of this incident, which would be proved to be a lie by a court ruling in February 2014 ("Başörtülü anneye saldırının görüntü," 2014).
6. See Ahmet Tonak (2013) and Jay Cassano (2013); both of them, and others who share their approach, refer extensively to the works of Henri Lefebvre (1996) and David Harvey (2012).

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