

An Assessment of the Gezi Protests in Turkey in 2013: Political Agency as an Articulation Practice

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Abstract

The Gezi protests in Turkey in 2013 were a mass reaction to a government urban regeneration project in Istanbul's Taksim Square and Gezi Park. The mobilization, which started with occupying the park and square, rapidly expanded into a mass movement beyond Istanbul. Through analyzing the subjectification that emerged in the protests, this paper argues that the Gezi resistance represents a discursive articulation among diverse agencies and identities as Laclau and Mouffe suggest in their radical democracy theory. The article aims to describe the movement's discursive elements, and reveal how the divergent elements linked in an articulated whole and established new political frontiers, in order to understand how a diverse set of agencies and identities were able to act as an articulated whole. Was it a movement defending rights to the city, defending a life style or struggling against the government's neoliberal policies? I argue that partial struggles and diverse antagonisms in articulatory practices constituted a subject including all these contexts.

Key Words: Radical democracy, Gezi protests, discourse theory, discursive subject, political subject

Introduction

The social protests that started in Istanbul before spreading throughout Turkey during June 2013 were unexpected for both the protesters and government. Initially, they just represented an objection to a number of trees being felled in a public park, but they then turned into a mass demonstration against the government and its policies as one of the most spontaneous aggregate movements in the Republic's history. This resistance was particularly significant for gathering diverse groups of people through unifying discursive elements in Istanbul's central square.

Some analysts of these events have searched for continuities with previous anti-government reactions, referring to the social movement literature, while others have attempted to explore the public sphere established during the protests (e.g., Dogan, 2014; Ulker Yukselbaba et al., 2014). Others have argued that the protests resulted from new political opportunity structures and forms of social domination (e.g., Gurcan & Peker, 2015; Eken, 2014). Finally, some have examined the class features of the movement sociologically and politically to assess whether the protests might be considered as aggregating around demands for rights to the city against neoliberal policies (e.g., Saracoglu, 2014; Baysal, 2014).

In this article, I examine the agency that emerged in the Gezi demonstrations as an articulation practice, besides being a radical democratic action, in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) sense. Aiming to demonstrate how subjectivity in the protests comprised diverse elements, I argue that different antagonisms became a discursive subject through articulation. From this analysis, I suggest that the Gezi resistance may be considered as an example of radical democratic collectivity to explain its hegemonic content.

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If subjectivity is a practice involving the articulation of multiple discourses, may any contextual part within be distinctive to describe the resistance such as right to the city; defence of secularism or struggle against neoliberalism? To make explicit the protests' discursive content, I analyze the prevailing discourses of the Gezi resistance in Istanbul, searching for agents and articulation practices. In the first part, by defining the notion of the radical democratic subject, I attempt to clarify why the demonstrations represent radical democracy and discursive articulation. The second part provides a thick description of the Gezi resistance, describing the background, actors, reasons, triggering events and basic features. Finally, by combining the different discursive elements that emerged in the search for an articulation, I explain the sudden rise of the resistance as resulting from a discursive articulation across different contexts. In doing so, I apply the language, claims, definitions and slogan that appeared in the protests to analyze their discourse. I also use surveys collected during the protests and media commentaries to identify the characteristics of the movement.

1. Discursive subjectivity and articulation practices

Radical democracy theory, which emphasizes agonistic pluralism, suggests a multiplicity of subjects rather than a single subject, argues for a discursive construction of the subject, and avoids privileging any particular antagonism over others. The radical democracy approach objects to establishing a rational consensus in the public sphere; instead it aims to defuse the potential for conflict by providing the possibility for antagonism to be transformed into agonism (Springer, 530). Agonism refers to the condition of contestation between adversaries, which cannot in that sense be abolished in democratic societies (Mouffe, 2000). Thus, there is no hierarchy between various interests and agencies. This is a premise of politics on the basis of differences and an articulation practice, engendering hegemony of the collective will, rather than a unique, given subject (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In opposing the system, one particular mobilization for a particular demand or objective is equivalent to any other. Thus, it is not the nature of demands or objectives, but their equivalence in a variety of mobilizations and struggles that makes them relational to each other (Laclau 2007, 40). From this it follows that a discursive articulation allows various antagonisms to come together in certain contexts through discourses to struggle against a common enemy.

According to Laclau, as particularist identities arise, their articulation becomes a central issue in political and theoretical agenda in order to identify the relationship between universalism and particularism (Laclau, 1995). Discourse theory is one key to understanding that phenomenon, because it emphasizes "the idea that all objects and practices are meaningful, and that social meanings are contextual, relational, and contingent" (Howarth 2005, 317). While determining dislocation as the central category of the theory, Laclau (1990) proposes four characteristics of social relations: contingency, historicity, power and the primacy of politics. In regard to dislocation, he claims that "every identity is dislocated", which has paradoxical effects that threaten identities while simultaneously constituting new identities (Laclau 1990, 36- 39). Thus, "the identities of social agents are constituted within structures of articulatory practice, and political subjects arise when agents are identified anew under conditions of dislocation" (Howarth 2005, 317).

In his investigation of how to apply discourse theory in empirical research, Howarth (2005) states that a discourse approach is not one to be applied to all problems although it is still possible to determine appropriate research objects. These are "the constitution of political identities; the practices of hegemonic articulation among particular discourses and subjectivities; the construction of social antagonisms and the establishment of political frontiers; the ways subjects are 'gripped' by certain discourses and not others" (Howarth 2005, 321).

As mentioned above, the Gezi resistance had a diverse content composed of different political identities and social agents, constructed as a bloc through its articulatory practices against the government. In this case, different elements of opposition to ten years of government practice came together through a discourse, stressing commonality in opposing the governing party. The protest slogan "Government, resign!" can be seen as the most unifying political demand, though many other slogans became quite popular during the nationwide protests.

In a post-marxist approach, "the articulation of a common political identity amongst a dispersed set of agencies and subjects" is the basis for a hegemonic ideology (Howarth 2002, 131). This also requires dividing the social space into two camps to construct equivalent relations between different elements (Howarth 2002, 131). Establishing political frontiers is possible through empty signifiers, referring "a signifier without a signified" (Laclau 2007, 36). The social production of empty signifiers involves a collaboration between divergent interests and subjects in the face of a common enemy (Howarth 2002, 131).

The Gezi resistance is a clear example of the social space being divided into two camps of differently positioned social actors. In fact, any social protest, in any context, can potentially involve the articulatory practice of diverse subjects if they manage a temporarily reconciliation of their differences and contradictions, as in the case of the Black Consciousness Movement in 1970s' South Africa (Howarth 2002). Although a totally different context, the Black Consciousness Movement is still a representative case to examine discursive subjectivity because it included "a wide range of constituencies with different identities, ethnic groups, social classes and status groups" (Howarth 2002, 131). In this case, as Howarth (2002) points out, all the divergent elements became an articulated whole through the construction of a common black identity against a common enemy – white racism. Similarly, the Gezi resistance with its diverse actors, contradictions and discursive elements, also represents a temporary reconciliation peculiar to its own historicity. The discursive subjectivity that emerged in the resistance rapidly converted the protests into a mass movement.

2. Story and the background of the resistance

The Gezi resistance in 2013 June, started as an occupation against the destruction of Gezi Park in Taksim Square, Istanbul, before becoming a mass reaction against police brutality and the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) government. The Taksim pedestrianisation project, initially the main issue behind the resistance, had already been a controversial topic in the public sphere, among various professional chambers, trade unions and neighborhood businesses for two years. Taksim is a prominent square in Istanbul, as one of the city's shopping, entertainment, social and cultural facilities, while Gezi Park is the last small green space in the square. The government announced an urban development project for this square before the previous elections as part of their campaign, and it was also included in the government's 61st policy programme (Official Journal, 2011) before being approved by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipal Council in 2011.

The project aimed to pedestrianise the square and reconstruct the Ottoman-era Taksim Military Barracks to house a shopping mall and a possible residence on the site of Gezi Park. Although the pedestrianisation project was accepted unanimously in the Council, the proposal to reconstruct the barracks was only accepted with a majority of votes. Following this approval, the decision was immediately prosecuted. In addition, the Chamber of Architects arranged a public meeting with other chambers and civil organizations to discuss the project in February 2012. On March 2nd, these organizations published an objection to the Taksim Project and started an opposition campaign under the name of Taksim Solidarity, which became a coordinating actor in the Gezi resistance during the protests. The opposition had three main themes:

a. The first objection was not directly against the content of the project but against the decision-making mechanisms, claiming that the project had been designed in a non-transparent manner, without any scientific or technical consultation. They also criticized the project's presentation to public for skipping the necessary democratic steps (Taksim Solidarity, 2013). Thus, they argued that the project was an example of authoritarian governmental practice designed to benefit various pro-government construction firms rather than an example of urban planning in the public interest.

b. Other objections related directly to engineering and architectural issues. In particular, architects and engineers objected to the planned use of tunnels, retaining walls and corridor-style pavements because they would obstruct pedestrian access to the square and destroy the integrity of the space (Gumus, 2012).

c. The opposition campaign also objected to the project as "concretisation", "dehumanisation" and "depersonalisation". In their view, the project would eliminate key public spaces that were essential to the identity and memory of the city (Radikal, 2012). They emphasised that Taksim Square was one of the most significant examples of urban planning and architecture from the early Republic period, making it a historical and cultural legacy. Part of this legacy was also due to Taksim's role as a space of May Day celebrations, demonstrations and other kinds of public meetings. Thus, part of the objection referred to the specific symbolic meaning of Taksim Square. As I explain later, Taksim Square has always had strong symbolic meanings in Turkish history. Particularly, since 1977, it has become the object of a continuing, on-and-off political struggle between the state and the working class.

This period of opposition to the Taksim Project, from the first joint declaration of Taksim Solidarity in March 2012 until May 2013, did not include large, mass meetings or protests.

Rather, it represented the reaction of certain groups, limited to environmentalist civil organizations, chambers of architecture and engineering, and some small neighbourhood corporates. Thus, when they managed to prevent the bulldozers from demolishing Gezi Park on the first day of the occupation, on 27th May, they were still only a small group of around fifty people.

There was not a planned action, but rather a sudden reaction to prevent the park from being destroyed even before planning permission had been granted. The protesters quickly occupied the park with their tents to obstruct the construction. The first news about them, on 28th May, reported that 'the destruction of trees in Gezi Park was protested by a group called Taksim Solidarity Components' (Radikal, 2013). In only a few days, this protest became a mass resistance. Two significant factors triggered these bigger protests. One was a parliamentary deputy's action of standing in front of a bulldozer to stop it. He made a clear call to citizens, civil organizations, labor unions and other deputies to go and protect the park. In his speech, he argued that neo-liberalism had no religion and no belief and that the decision to demolish such a green public space was purely the result of neo-liberal policies. The second factor was the police forces' disproportionate intervention against protestors, with tear gas and water cannons. Social media played a key role to inform people about police brutality, which rapidly enabled the protest to develop into a mass resistance including occupations, strikes and huge demonstrations in the square, and supporting protests across the country. The focus of these protests also broadened beyond the destruction of Gezi Park, turning them into an anti-government, anti-JDP movement.

3. Features, symbols and subjects

The main novel features of the resistance were its lack of centralised leadership, and its individuality, diversity and creativity.

a. During the whole period, there was no defined authority of any organization or centralised leadership except for the very limited and spontaneous role of Taksim Solidarity. As stated above, Taksim Solidarity was only a platform of various organizations, and it had such a flexible and horizontal texture that all components had an equal right to speak, any organization could join or leave easily, and there was no hierarchy or leadership among its components. Although this solidarity platform had been opposing the Taksim Project for two years, it was not the subject, creating or organising the resistance. Rather, it spontaneously emerged as the only representative actor of the resistance, with the role of coordinating and guiding it, not managing or leading it.

b. The resistance was described by intellectuals and academics in two different ways referring to the same phenomenon. Most of the protesters participated individually and spontaneously. Some analysts called this a case of postmodern resistance while others defined it as anarchist. In order to explain this, I'll mention two surveys collected during the occupation, and various media commentaries. The first survey is the first public opinion poll carried out online during the Gezi resistance by two academics (Bilgic & Kafkasli, 2013). This survey, which was responded to by 3,000 protesters, indicated that half of the protesters had never protested before, while only 7.7% of respondents came to Taksim encouraged by an organization they were affiliated with. According to the second survey (KONDA, 2014), the largest public survey interviewing 4,411 people during the two days of resistance, 69% of the protesters had first heard the news from social media. 49% decided to participate in response to the police forces' brutality, while 14% decided to participate after hearing the Prime Minister's heavy-handed criticisms of the protesters. Many considered the Prime Minister to be the leading actor of the larger protests because of his pronouncements. Finally, according to the survey, 79% of protesters were not members of any political party or civil organization.

Many commentaries and observations also noted the individualistic, spontaneous and unorganized attributes of the protests:

"It is a kind of postmodern resistance. ...It is quietly individualistic. Oblivious. Freewheeling. It reflects the overall characteristics of the new urban and secular generations. Peaceful and supportive in all its individuality." (Candar, 2013).

"They are not a part of established politics. This is a spontaneous, unorganized and leaderless movement. These people took to the streets for their own freedoms and futures. Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, they are not pursuing the ideal of a 'world free from exploitation.' Whatever they want is for themselves and that is why it is not easy to cope with them." (Gursel, 2013). Some analysts reported on the anarchistic tendencies of this spontaneous and unorganized movement:

"This uprising wave that has embraced the world since 2011 can be described as an anarchist wave. ...What are the signs of that spirit? There are many of them in our country. Participating in protests individually or through friends' connections ... An attitude of not accepting orders from anybody... Distrust in organized structures" (Tugal, 2013)

c. Even just a quick look was enough to see clearly the heterogeneity of the protestors. It was such a diverse mass, including all branches of leftists, Kemalists, extreme nationalists, Kurds, the LGBT movement, the feminist movement, the anti-capitalist Muslim movement, and even supporters of soccer teams. Tolerance of all differences, opinions and individuals was one of the most prominent discourses of the occupation. Pious Muslims praying in the square alongside photographs of Republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the leader of Kurdish political movement Abdullah Öcalan were the most popular examples of this discourse of differences. Thus, the protestors were able to overcome the usual polarities, such as Islamist/ secular or Turkish/ Kurdish nationalisms.

According to first poll mentioned above, 81% of respondents identified themselves as 'libertarians', with the next most common identification being 'secular' at 64%. The 'Libertarian' option ranked highest in other surveys too. In the same survey, 92% of participants stated that they joined the protests because of Prime Minister Erdoğan's authoritarian attitude. According to KONDA's poll, 58% were in the park because their freedoms were restricted, 37% were against the AKP and its policies, 30% were reacting against Erdoğan's statements and attitude, and 20% were there to prevent the trees' destruction.

In fact, this is an evaluation of the protests' heterogeneity, considering its discursive structures and participants. As mentioned above, some of the analyses that have searched for continuities with other recent mass mobilizations have revealed that various partial mobilizations stemmed from certain injustice frames and, that they also evoked Gezi resistance. This approach involves describing the demonstrations' subjects concretely. For instance, workers, environmentalist organizations, supporters of soccer teams, secular, urban and/or middle class women, and Alawites are some of the agents referring to certain injustice frames that emerged during JDP's governing period between 2011-2013 (Dogan 2014, 93-96). Any frame, indicating both a certain antagonism and subjectivity, constitutes a set of agencies and identities acting in protests. Every agency articulated each other inspecific discursive structures and established a political frontier as being against government practices.

d. The final basic feature of the protests was humour, expressed through creative language and forms. The government side and police forces acted very aggressively against the protestors, yet the protestors redefined and turned it back against the authorities through humorous puns and wordplay. Slogans, posters and graffiti, videos, street shows, and many symbols became the instruments of a humorous opposition language via social media. Expression itself turned into a way of resisting. As one piece of graffiti put it, "I couldn't find a slogan yet", which shows that expression itself can be more important than what you express. In accordance with other analyses, this looks very similar to the Greek and Spanish square movements in 2011. As in those cases, "the protestors describe how, through protesting they realise that they have a voice and, that others listen to them" (Prentoulis & Thomassen 2013, 168). This refers a case of subjectification in the protests all by itself. Below are some of the humorous statements responding to police brutality and the prime minister's words:

"Welcome to the first traditional gas festival"

"The rich kids have better gas masks, we are jealous."

"You did not need to use pepper spray to make us weep, we are emotional people."

(Written on the shutters of a cosmetic store) "Pepper spray is good for the skin."

"I asked God Almighty, He said #resistGezi."

(Regarding Erdoğan's famous speech urging Turkish families to have three children): "Would you really like to have three kids like us?"

(Regarding restrictive regulations on alcohol sales): "You banned alcohol, we sobered up."

(To Erdoğan), "If you had allowed the trees, they would have made just a shadow, but now they're producing great fruit."

"When you get angry you are very pretty, Turkey"

However, the main common motto was: "This is just the beginning; the struggle continues!" That is, the protests no longer just concerned the protection of a public space.

4. The discursive elements

Regarding the approaches used to explain what the Gezi resistance represents in Turkey, we can see two main frameworks. One understands the conflict that emerged in Gezi as part of Turkey's modernization and development process, and a reflection of clashes that have continued between secular and religious, Kemalist and Islamist, East and West since the Ottoman Reformation. In this framework, the Taksim urban development project is understood as part of the AKP's neo-Ottoman, Islamist projection against the Republican legacy because of the symbolism of the Ottoman barracks and Taksim Square stemming from the early Republic.

According to the second approach, the Gezi resistance is an uprising against the JDP's neoliberal policies for urban space, seeing the JDP as strongly continuing Turkey's 30 year-long neoliberalization process. Urban renewal projects have been at the center of AKP policies for the last ten years, causing great social tensions in urban areas, particularly in Istanbul. Thus, from this perspective, Gezi has developed into an explosion of this social unrest that is a manifestation of the citizens' claim to their right to the city against neoliberalism, from being initially only a struggle to protect a single public space. These two frameworks emphasise different aspects of the events, and over the two weeks of the Gezi resistance these different dynamics operated simultaneously within a discursive articulation.

To clarify these frameworks, I'll try to describe their basis. Since the early Republic, Taksim Square has always been a contested subject for different political powers. After the Independence War, a memorial was constructed on the square representing the war and revolution, before the square was named Republic Square in 1928. However, people continued to call it Taksim. The destruction of the Ottoman Barracks in 1940 for a new urban planning project that included a Park called İsmet İnönü (later, Gezi Park), one of the founders of the Republic with Atatürk, represented a new period and its values (Yılmaz, 2013). The square also became important for Turkey's labour movement following a massacre that killed 34 people in the May Day celebrations of 1977. The square was then closed to any mass demonstrations until 2010. However, during this period it became a space of struggle between the state and social movements. In addition, since the 1970s, Islamic parties have wished to build a new mosque on the square, which was opposed by the Kemalist elite.

This dispute over the mosque between secularist and Islamists has made Taksim's political symbolism deeper. During the Gezi resistance, the tension between secularists and Islamists became clearly visible in discourses about freedoms and life-style. Even though the protests started with an environmentalist motivation, they quickly expanded into a strong defence of secular life-styles and values, not only against various specific restrictive regulations and concrete authoritarian rearrangements. In addition, the arrogance of Erdoğan, all insulting manifestations on women, secular youth, minorities, imposing conservative life-style were on target. The protests could have easily turned into a clash between Kemalists and Islamists as has happened before, but they did not. This time, there was another strong discourse proposing that cities and public spaces belong to the inhabitants, so administrators should consult the inhabitants about any decisions concerning such places in a real democracy. The subjects of these discourses included diverse groups, both sociologically and ideologically, who were sensitive to the Kemalist-Islamist dilemma, as can be seen from the following brief examples:

- One slogan that became one of the most popular was: "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Keser." The original slogan used by Kemalist youth is: "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal," while Mustafa Keser is a famous Turkish folk singer. Thus, it was a humorous challenge to the Kemalist stance in the protests.

- Taksim Solidarity's secretary, Mucella Yapıcı, described the conflict that caused the protests from a different point of view. Her words represent the anti-capitalist political line of the movement:

"It [the government's policy] is called Islam, political Islam etc., but it is not; it is totally an ideological settlement of right-wing governments continuing since the '80's. Of course, we're also acting ideologically: our ideology is acting reasonably for an inhabitable city and universal rules. Capitalism is trying to overcome its own crisis in cities throughout the world. It is the system's going mad." (Radikal, 2013)

- One leftist platform named 'Our Commons' which played an effective role in the resistance, defined the struggle's common line as related to the city:

"The struggle for Gezi Park became the place to voice all our rage against anything preventing us from deciding on our own way to live the city." (Our Commons, 2013)

This discourse of the right to live in an inhabitable city, of course, did not suddenly emerge during the Gezi resistance, and although it has been a part of Taksim Solidarity's campaign for almost two years it was not related to just the Taksim Project either. Rather, Istanbul and especially Taksim Beyoglu in recent years was already a contested area between the government and small, fragmented opposition groups because of urban development projects.

Conclusion

During JDP's three terms of government, privatizing public spaces and services, and urban development and renewal projects have been central policies, with Istanbul, as the biggest metropolis, being the most significant space. Urban development has been a means of opening public spaces and historical sites to the market during JDP rule. It has also meant the displacement of poor populations and disadvantaged groups, including Kurds, Romans and Alevis. This has provoked the formation of small, local organizations and demonstrations in many neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, the demolition of particular historical and cultural buildings, like Haydarpasa railway station and port and the historic movie theater Emek in Beyoglu, has provoked a group of middle class intellectuals, artists and actors to organize to prevent such destruction in the last two years. Thus, the social processes that has led to unrest by different groups is one of the reasons for the heterogeneity in Gezi.

Most of these events have developed out of sight of Turkey's mainstream media. However, throughout Istanbul, small, disconnected and very fragmented organizations and potential opposition groups have already emerged within this period. For instance, 41 of 108 the participating organizations in Taksim Solidarity are directly city and environment-oriented civil organizations in Istanbul. Various initiatives intended to connect them have also taken place, such as platforms like Taksim Solidarity or Istanbul City Movements, or forums like the City Movements Forum or leftist groups like 'Commons'. Nevertheless, until the Gezi resistance exploded, the public sphere had seemed quite incapable and easily defeatable by the government. The following quotation from the 'Commons' manifesto illustrates this state of affairs.

"For us, the urgent need of the present time is to create and multiply the spaces of opposition and solidarity to break off from this powerlessness and fragmentation. To make possible a series of articulations on several levels, ranging from the practical necessities of everyday life to more abstract political analyses. We know that we will be able to break the waves attacking us, to dispel the effect of disintegration caused on us by neo-liberalism, to the extent that we are able to create and multiply these common spaces." (Our Commons, 2013)

We should not forget that this was written during Gezi. That is, Gezi represents a concrete, visible version of the articulation of different discourses, symbols and subjects. Although the discourse of the right to the city, like other discourses, cannot represent the whole movement on its own, each partial discourse articulated with others effectively to constitute a political agency. The stress on the legitimacy of difference, the diversity of rights-based groups, and a common defense of freedom have together made possible an articulation beyond narrow identity dilemmas. It can be understood that antagonism was transformed into agonism as Mouffe suggests. Of course, additionally, an anti-JDP and anti-Erdogan stance, as a negative connective element, has played a key role in this articulation.

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