

Review Article

Politics of the Square: Remembering Gezi Park Protests Five Years Later

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Umut Özkırımlı (ed.). *The Making of a Protest Movement: #occupygezi*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, xx + 154 pages.

Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış (eds.). *‘Everywhere Taksim’: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 296 pages.

Güneş Koç and Harun Aksu (eds.). *Another Brick in the Barricade: The Gezi Resistance and Its Aftermath*. Bremen: Weiner Verlag für Sozialforschung, 2015, 328 pages.

Efe Can Gürcan and Efe Peker. *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey’s Gezi Park*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 202 pages.

Five years have passed since the now infamous protests took place in late May 2013 in response to the government’s attempt to demolish Gezi Park in Istanbul. The plan was to open up the park’s space for the construction of a shopping mall with a high-end residence complex as a part of a broader urban transformation project. Except for a handful of environmental activists the project had not caught the public’s attention until the images of police brutality to disperse the protestors quickly spread through the social media, and kindled the fire of clashes all over the country.

“Life happens so fast [in Turkey]”, one of the Gezi protestors once told me in an interview a couple of years ago. Events that shake and shock spectators as well as those who participate in them take new, unexpected turns almost instantaneously. The “Gezi episode” was no different: On May 28, 2013, after the iconic photo of an MP, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, blocking a bulldozer from removing the trees in the park surfaced in the social media, the violent handling by the police of the ensuing protest was, too, iconized by another photo, this time of a young female protestor wearing a red dress being cruelly tear-gassed

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along with a number of other environmental activists. The unrest that drew increasing numbers of protestors to the park had already been brewing for some time: the AKP government's increasingly authoritarian rule, which included significant restrictions on freedom of speech and of press, access to the Internet, and right to assembly and protest were among the many reasons behind the mounting discontent. Moreover, following Taysyip Erdoğan's endorsement of fostering a "pious generation", a more conservative lifestyle was being imposed on the public with restricting the sale of alcohol, attempting to criminalize abortion, claiming homosexuality as "a disease", expanding the sphere of influence of *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Directorate of Religious Affairs), and introducing bills in the parliament to overhaul the education system along religious lines.. Finally the government's failure in handling the Uludere (Roboski) Massacre (which happened in 2011 when Turkish warplanes bombed and killed 34 ethnically Kurdish citizens, many of whom were children, engaging in smuggling activities along the Iraqi border) and the Reyhanlı bombings (when two car bombs killed 52 people and wounded 140 in the town of Reyhanlı near the Syrian border in 2013) were the latest signs of distrust between the government and Kurdish and Alevi populations in the country.

A diverse composition of dissidents congregated behind the barricades of Gezi Park: they were often young and seemingly apolitical men and women who were either university students or had promising white-collar jobs, living more or less middle-class lifestyles. Yet they also included soccer fans from more modest working class backgrounds, environmentalists, secular nationalists, feminists, LGBTQ individuals, Kurds, Alevis, anti-capitalist Muslims, and radical left groups. Representatives of formal organizations such as trade unions, chambers and associations were present, too, although they did not assume a primary role during the protests. Neither the intensifying police violence nor Erdoğan's growing frustration could prevent more citizens from joining the protests in the days following the initial clashes.

When the police retreated on June 2 and allowed the protestors settle in the park, this was the beginning of an experience in an alternative lifestyle for two weeks. A fully operational kitchen and infirmary were created, along with a functional library with thousands of books in its holdings. There was an open mic in every corner of the park for those who wanted to share their opinion with those who cared to listen. A playground, a movie screen, a concert area and yoga classes were among the many initiatives that transformed the park into a shared public space, and for some, a "commune". But this "alternative universe" could survive only two weeks when the police eventually forced the campers out of the park. The latter retreated to other public parks in the city and all around the country, holding public forums with hundreds of people attending to discuss the future of their rebellion. As the spark that mobilized

thousands of people into the streets in seventy-nine out eighty-one cities in Turkey was fizzling out in the coming weeks and months, the police violence, numerous casualties, lies and smears, as well as marvelously creative acts of dissent were engraved on the country's collective memory.

Much ink has since been spilled on this unexpected, carnivalesque episode in Turkish history. Aside from countless magazine articles, newspaper columns, blog entries, and other commentaries, many academic studies touched upon various aspects of the protests, ranging from the underlying socio-economic factors that fed the frustration to the demographical details of the protestors and their experiences during the occupation of Gezi Park. While most of the book-length publications appeared in Turkish¹ there were exceptions, too, which, despite their small number, provided English-speaking audience a diverse set of analyses.²

In this article I will examine four of these books which cover a wide array of issues and debates on Gezi protests. They all trace several key topics as well as engage in courageous fights with some of the existing theoretical positions to offer fresh perspectives. More importantly, each of these books in their own way becomes a venue where the Gezi experience is introduced into conversations within various fields of social scientific inquiry. As such they are among the finest candidates that rise up to the task of placing the Turkish case in international context.

- 1 Some of these include: E. Abat, E. Bulduruç, F. Korkmaz (eds.), *Bizim Bir Haziranımız* (İstanbul: Patika Kitap, 2014); E. Saltık (ed.), *#diren Sosyoloji* (İstanbul: Kaldırım, 2013); M. İplikçi, *Biz Orada Mutluyduk* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2013); M. Özbank, *Gezi Ruhü ve Politik Teori* (İstanbul: Kolektif Kitap, 2013); N. Özkoray, E. Özkoray, *Gezi Fenomeni* (İstanbul: Idea Politika, 2013); Ö. Göztepe (ed.), *Gezi Direnişi Üzerine Düşünceler* (Ankara: Notabene, 2013); G. Çakır, Ö. Başpınar Aktütün (eds.), *Gezi Tartışmaları* (Ankara: Ütopya Yayınevi, 2015); B. Yıldırım, *Sanki Devrim* (Ankara: Notabene, 2014); K. Inal (ed.), *Gezi, İsyan, Özgürlük* (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2013); A. Kara, Ö. Karaduman, Y. Dinçer (eds.) *18 Brumaire'den Taksim Direnişine Gezi'yi Soldan Kavramak* (İstanbul: Kalkedon, 2014); D. Fırat, C. Erdal, *Devrimci Bir Pusula: Gezi* (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2017); V. S. Öğütle, E. Göker, *Gezi ve Sosyoloji* (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2014); C. Tuğal, *Gezi'nin Yükselişi, Liberalizmin Düşüşü* (İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2013); F. Benlisoy, *Gezi Direnişi* (İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2013); O. Ahıncay, *Gezi Ruhü – Bir İsyanın Halesi* (İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2013); Ş. Argın, *Gezi'nin Ufkundan* (İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2013); G. Ayata, P. Çağlı, et. al. *Gezi Parkı Olayları İnsan Hakları Hukuku ve Siyasal Söylem Işığında Bir İnceleme* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2013); H. Kömürçüoğlu, *Y Kuşağını Anlamak : Bir Gezi Parkı Araştırması* (İstanbul: Doğu Kitabevi, 2015)
- 2 Other books in English which either directly focus on Gezi protests or have chapters that did so include Kaya Genç, *Under the Shadow* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Altuğ Yalçıntaş, *Creativity and Humour in Occupy Movements* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015); Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir, *The Road to Gezi: Resistance and Counter-Publics in 21st Century Turkey* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2016); O. Hemer, H-A. Persson (eds), *In the Aftermath of Gezi: From Social Movement to Social Change?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Z. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017); B. Turam, *Gaining Freedoms: Claiming Space in Istanbul and Berlin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); C. Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model* (London: Verso, 2016)

As I will elaborate later on, there is no single defining or overarching theme that binds the sections in any of the three edited books under review, which is not surprising considering the multi-faceted nature of the 'Gezi phenomenon'. With a total of thirty-eight chapters (plus a chapter-size foreword), the edited volumes cover a wide range of issues and topics, including the neoliberal, authoritarian character of the AKP government, the underlying factors of the eruption of the Gezi protests, the composition of the protestors, comparisons with the past protests in Turkey, theoretical interventions into the 'Gezi Spirit', the spatial/urban dimension of the Gezi protests, sexuality and body-politics in Gezi Park, among others. The only monograph under review, on the other hand, offers a comprehensive theoretical account of the Gezi protests in a critical conversation with the New Social Movements literature, and as such becomes a fine complement to the edited volumes.

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The Making of a Protest Movement is one of the earliest books to appear in English that aim to offer an academic view of the Gezi protests. In his introductory chapter Özkırımlı lays out the aim of the collection as offering "a preliminary analysis of Gezi protests, based on participant observations, informal interviews with protestors, and, in some cases, active participation in the events as they were/are unfolding".³ While admitting that the book does not offer a "well-rounded analysis of the specific factors or the more general dynamics that have generated these protests"⁴, Özkırımlı rightly suggests that the attempt to make sense of the convergence of different grievances and concerns, and how these evolved into 'injustice frames' fueling contentious action at Gezi Park, is still pertinent. Providing, at the end of the book, a brief chronology of the events that happened during that summer, the book aims to keep the image of that period vivid in the readers' memory.

Yet, except for some of the chapters, the book lacks rigor in its theoretical treatment of the protests. The primary exceptions are Judith Butler's foreword and Zeynep Gambetti's chapter, "Occupy Gezi as Politics of the Body", both of which offer the strongest analytical exposé of Gezi as an assembly of 'bodies' contesting the neoliberal state. As if heralding the main thrust of her future work⁵ to appear two years after the publication of this book, Butler presents Gezi and similar street protests as "concrete and concerted corporeal actions exercising freedom of expression and freedom of assembly".⁶ For her,

3 Umüt Özkırımlı (ed.). *The Making of a Protest Movement: #occupygezi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

4 Ibid.

5 Judith Butler. *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)

6 Özkırımlı (ed.). *The Making of a Protest Movement*, 90

neoliberalism, and especially the privatization of the commons, is compatible with – and actually needs – authoritarianism, posing a threat to liberal democracy. The criminalization and ill-treatment of the protestors during and after the Gezi under the guise of ‘security of the nation’ and ‘terrorism’ became a showcase for this contemporary condition. On the other hand, the alliance of an array of diverse groups in Taksim Square, as well as in the networks of the social media, became the epitome of direct democracy against the assaults of the neoliberal state. The newly defined ‘people’ in the park not only gathered to preserve the natural, cultural and political history against destruction by state censorship and privatization, but they also offered systems of support to one another, as if exercising a new sense of democracy, in the face of police violence.⁷

It is important to note that this new democratic practice was not planned or deliberated by well-organized political groups, but was rather, as Gambetti reminds us, a product of the “kinesis of thousands of bodies”⁸ that were constantly moving between and occupying spaces in their confrontation with the authority. The surplus of bodies that emerged from this constant movement became a significant threat to the authority’s carefully-crafted discourse and imagery of Turkey as an economically successful democracy. The unconventional lifestyle emerging from Gezi offered “an alternative to the politically centralized, ideologically conservative and economically neoliberal AKP rule”.⁹ This experience of ecological, anti-capitalist, inclusionary, plural participatory democracy was what made Gezi beyond an environmental protest and the emerging “corporeal assemblage that acted as a living multiplicity” terrified the government.

While what happened in Gezi was novel and interesting from a political theoretical point of view, a more immediate question is about where it stands in the contemporary political history of Turkey: Where did Gezi come from, and why did it rise at this particular historical juncture? *The Making of a Protest Movement* tries to address these questions through a couple of chapters which had appeared in shorter forms in an independent online magazine on Arab Affairs (*Jadaliyya*). These chapters (especially the ones by Özel, Iğsız, and Tuğal) address a broad range of questions on contemporary politics of Turkey as the underlying context of these protests, and are often descriptive overviews to provide complementary background information to understanding the increasingly authoritarian character of the AKP.

It is indisputable that Gezi protests were an outburst of anger against authoritarianism and infringement of social and private lives by the government.

7 Ibid., xii-xiv

8 Ibid., 90

9 Ibid., 93

Indeed, the urban transformation project in Taksim which foresaw the demolition of Gezi Park was interpreted by mostly middle-class groups as a symbolic attack on Westernized lifestyles. In “A Moment of Elation”, Özel contends that the Gezi protests carried by the impoverished middle classes demonstrated how the link between democracy and liberalism was eroding, and that a new definition of citizenship was emerging as the AKP government pursued a strictly majoritarian and divisive model of democracy.

In her chapter “Brand Turkey and the Gezi Protests” Iğsız follows Özel, and focuses on how legal changes institutionalized the centralization of power, with which came cronyism and authoritarianism. Iğsız documents how the AKP government was heavily relying on decrees – rather than following parliamentary procedures of law making – as the main vehicle of government, paving the way for diminishing the power of autonomous groups, criminalizing any form of dissent from journalists, lawyers, doctors, and academics, and effectively turning into a police-state. For Iğsız, the Gezi protests were a critical moment of crystallization and refusal of the country’s descent into authoritarianism.

In the last chapter (“Gülenism”) that focuses on politics to explain the Gezi protests, Tuğal problematizes and ultimately refutes assertions that the Gülenist movement offers a more moderate version of conservative democratic model. He demonstrates how Islamic conservatism historically evolved into being a carrier of authoritarian nationalism in the hands of the Gülenist movement, which – in a similar vein with the AKP – did not shy away from supporting the suppression, silencing and criminalization of any form of opposition. For Tuğal, the movement’s dehumanization of the Gezi protestors is testimony to its exclusionary outlook for national unity and Islamic authoritarianism disguised with democratic pretense, which it shares with the AKP government.

As these chapters demonstrate *The Making of a Protest Movement* offers a rich account of Turkey as it has been spiraling into authoritarianism by highlighting the place of the Gezi protests in revealing this trend. In that respect, the book does a good job in offering political perspectives into the state of democratization (or rather its reversal) while paying only scant attention to the main actors – i.e. the protestors – in the Gezi Park. Except for highlighting the fact that these comprised a diverse set of groups, the book does not include chapters that focus on the composition and characteristics of these protestors. The next book under review, *Everywhere Taksim*, offers a more satisfactory treatment of this particular aspect of the protests.

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Similar to *The Making of a Protest Movement*, the convergence of various grievances from different segments of the society leading to the Gezi protests is

the starting point for *Everywhere Taksim* as well. In their introduction, the editors David and Toktamış provide a nicely outlined and adequately detailed summary of the events leading up to the protests and their immediate aftermath. We are reminded how a relatively tiny opposition to an urban redevelopment project in this symbolically important part of the city evolved into a popular uprising bringing together a number of different groups in different parts of the country under the motto of “Everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance”.

The editors announce their goal in the book as to “make sense of the significance of the Gezi protests and contribute to the literature on social movements on Turkey”.¹⁰ The chapters in the book are brought together to demonstrate that, contrary to the claim that Turkey was becoming more democratic under the leadership of the AKP, the authoritarianism of the latter became apparent with Gezi protests, and that “a major sociological change was under way in Turkey” as previously antagonistic groups were unified overcoming their cleavages.¹¹ In order to chart the path towards this rupture, some of the chapters in the book offer in-depth political-economy perspectives to shed light on AKP’s neoliberal policies through which it consolidated its hegemony over the society and failed to deliver the much anticipated political liberalization and democratization.

But how was this hegemony established, and how could it survive as long as it did, until it was challenged by Gezi? One common explanation, echoed by Bozkurt in his chapter “AKP Rule in the Aftermath of the Gezi Protests”, is that while in power the AKP successfully implemented populist policies that utilized a combination of social assistance programs and nationalist, religious, conservative discourse to offset the damaging impact of neoliberalism. Until the Gezi protests revealed its fragility, this hegemonic rule served the interests of all segments of the bourgeoisie while at the same time creating a non-class identity among the relatively poor as well as the professional middle classes to defuse social conflict. As Özden and Berkmen indicate in their chapter “Rebelling Against Neoliberal Populist Regimes”, it was only when these groups – especially the increasingly proletarianized middle classes – realized their precariousness and loss of status that a form of consciousness arose and culminated in Gezi protests. In that sense, as Civelekoğlu suggests in “Enough is Enough”, Gezi was the last instance in a long chain of reactions which amounted to a countermovement (à la Polanyi) against the commodification and marketization of the commons, but especially of labor, as the growing discontent in the

10 Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış (eds.). *‘Everywhere Taksim’: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 20

11 *Ibid.*, 21

face of market expansion in all aspects of life became untamable within the hegemonic framework.

If the growing discontent was the main driver of the protests in Gezi, who were the main carriers of this discontent? *Everywhere Taksim* is at its strongest when it covers in various chapters different groups that joined the Gezi protests, and focus on the sources of their grievances and repertoires of their collective action. For instance, in their chapter “We are More Than Alliances Between Groups” Uluğ and Acar (whose book¹² remains to date to be the most comprehensive ethnographic study into the motivations and discourses of the participants of the Gezi protests) give the reader a nice sketch of the process through which politically unaffiliated individuals turned into protestors. We learn that while retaining their differences and other social associations, these individuals developed a common identity around which they united when the then prime minister Erdoğan labeled them as *çapulcu* (looter, marauder) as a way of attacking them. This new shared identity imposed on the protesting groups (which they gladly appropriated) could mobilize injustice frames (such as police brutality) which ultimately opened the way for collective action in and outside Gezi Park.

One such group was the soccer fans of major sports clubs of Istanbul who were in the forefronts of the clashes with the police during the most-heated days of the protests. According to Irak (“Istanbul United”), these soccer fans were indeed among the first to experience both the decline of their middle-class status in the face of increasing interference by the AKP government into internal affairs of the clubs as well as into the lifestyles of the fans, and the escalation of police violence in the stadiums. Their shared predicament made them overcome their longstanding animosity toward each other and united them to form a “supra-identity” to confront their precariousness.

Another important group (or, rather, category) among the protestors that received a lot of attention in the mainstream analyses of the Gezi days is the youth. As they carefully study in their chapter “Where did Gezi come from?” Gümüüş and Yılmaz refute the common belief that labels the Turkish youth (especially those that were born in the 1990s) as apolitical. They demonstrate that what attracted young people to the Gezi protests was the desire for a new form of political expression and social solidarity as they grew alienated from the conventional politics and its “necessary conformism”. In that sense, young people have always been political in their own way, and the Gezi protests gave them the opportunity to establish horizontal links, share knowledge about each other’s agendas and concerns, and create a collective identity that formed the basis of solidarity networks around a common purpose.

12 Ö. M. Uluğ and Y.G. Acar. *Bir Olmadan Biz Olmak* (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2014)

Yet, the analysis of this fascinating political process of new identity formation would be incomplete without a careful consideration of the spatial dynamics underlying the Gezi protests. After all, it all began as a defense of a handful of trees in a public park against an aggressive urban transformation project. It is important to note, as Alonso does in her chapter “Gezi Park: A Revindication of Public Space”, that the AKP government did not simply allow certain groups that politically supported it become wealthy through the construction sector. The neoliberal project of urban restructuring, to which Istanbul – and especially the Taksim-Beyoğlu area – was subjected, aimed to commodify culture and rewrite history by privatizing public spaces through urban gentrification projects and huge infrastructural investments. This way, the AKP government could recreate and rebrand the city in which new spaces of consumption were secured from social dissent, and existing social hierarchies were recast in favor of a new emerging class of conservative entrepreneurs with little to no tolerance to social diversity. As a result, the diversity of urban narrative in which different groups could coexist in their distinctiveness was fading away as a new authoritarian urban regime was marginalizing and even criminalizing any alternative form of urban existence. It was at this moment of suffocation, if not extinction, that Gezi protests erupted to counter the monopolization of the urban narrative through commodification and cultural repression which formed the basis of the AKP’s hegemonic project. It happened in this particular place because, as another chapter in the book (“We may be Lessees but the Neighborhood is Ours” by Karasulu) reminds us, Taksim has symbolic importance in the political memory of the public as a place not only of the secular Republic but also of struggle and resistance. As such, Taksim became “anywhere” and “everywhere” where all forms of opposition could unite against the neoliberal conservative policies of the hegemonic power.

It is through such spatial analyses that one can fully grasp the extent of the political alternative that emerged from Gezi, which envisioned a new understanding of plural, heterogeneous, non-hierarchical, self-organizing urban citizenship and solidarity around the idea of the commons. In that respect, *Everywhere Taksim* offers refreshing perspectives on the emergence of new forms of politics from Gezi. Yet, what the book fails to adequately address is the question of how this new political condition could be translated into concrete political practices and different types of dissent. The third book under review¹³ attempts to achieve this as an important addition to the scholarship on Gezi protests.

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Another Brick in the Barricade is indeed an ambitious collection in which different chapters utilize various angles to approach the ‘Gezi phenomenon’.

13 Güneş Koç and Harun Aksu (eds.). *Another Brick in the Barricade: The Gezi Resistance and Its Aftermath* (Bremen: Weiner Verlag für Sozialforschung, 2015)

Similar to *Everywhere Taksim*, the book aims to address many issues relevant to the Gezi protests and their aftermath, which are grouped around broad themes. Here, too, the themes are only loosely related to each other, and are grouped quite unevenly: The “Political Practices and Social Impact” section, for instance, consists of six chapters and extends through half the book, whereas the “Linking with Global Uprisings” section, which compares Gezi protests to other uprisings in different parts of the world, has only two chapters. Despite this structural imbalance, and while not all chapters live up to the promise (more on this later), the book brings together some fine ethnographic work and bold theoretical perspectives that aim to shed light on a range of features of the protests.

Any serious observation on the Gezi protests would reveal that what happened during the Gezi experience can not be reduced simply to an abstract political novelty, nor was it just an end point of political, economic and historical processes that culminated in the frustration of certain groups against an increasingly authoritarian regime personified in Erdoğan. In other words, Gezi was a dialectically evolving reality experienced in real time and space which constantly reproduced and rebuilt itself through various practices, ranging from devising survival strategies in the face of violent police attacks to inventing methods of self-sufficiency, communication and solidarity in occupied spaces. In that sense, it is imperative to shift the focus on Gezi, as D’Orsi does in his chapter “Crossing Boundaries and Reinventing Futures”, from “what it was” and “why it happened” to “how it was experienced”, in order to be able to trace how provisional and unplanned acts in response to repressive practices of the authority turned parallel frustrations into a coherent collective mobilization. Being called *çapulcu*, or being gassed by the police, for instance, became ways of fomenting a new collective identity which found its expression in humorous slogans or drawings by the protestors. Other bodily acts included simply ‘standing still’ (as in the case of *Duran Adam* [standing man]) which disrupted the spatial order imposed by the dominant power; or breaking fast with other protestors during Ramadan (such as *Yeryüzü Sofrası* [mother earth meals]) which destabilized the conservative government’s claim to be the sole representative of religious practices; or other artistic performances such as piano concerts, collective yoga sessions, and so forth. It was this transformation of the daily acts into political expressions that opened new social spaces and sabotaged the ideological imposition of the authority, concretizing new political imagination and redefining social reality during the protests.

Any mundane act, such as eating, could potentially become political. Various symbolisms, metaphors, practices and performances, which constitute the main subject of Haköz’s chapter “Eating in Gezi, Devouring Gezi”, became acts of defying the authority during the Gezi protests. This was possible not

only through the collective organization of *Yeryüzü Sofrası* as mentioned above, but also through organizing and mobilizing on the social media and in Gezi Park to make sure that everybody could have access to food and water. A continuous influx of donations were supplemented and then replaced by the ad-hoc kitchens created in the park that provided free food for all. Eventually different acts and staples of eating/drinking – from eating *kandil simidi* (savory rolls) during a holy night to consuming alcoholic beverages – became sites and symbols of contention and resistance during the Gezi period.

Yet, all these acts and moments of being and becoming political in Gezi did not happen in a social vacuum. Protestors were building the foundations of solidarity and a common identity among each other by reflecting on who they were, whom they could trust, and whom they should not. According to Acar and Uluğ (“Becoming Us without Being One”), who – as discussed earlier – also contributed to *Everywhere Taksim*, protestors were in the process of exploring their own positions vis-à-vis their in-groups and out-groups, and negotiating the terms and conditions of collective participation in the protests. In their impressive ethnographic study of ten different groups who were in Gezi Park during the two-week occupation, ranging from Alevi activists to anarchist soccer fans (*Çarşı*), from Kemalists to Kurds, from LGBTQ activists to *ülküçüler* (ultranationalists), Acar and Uluğ carefully tease out the sentiments of each group in terms of how they felt about the other groups, which both shaped and were shaped by the reasons why they took part in the protests. In the end, these identity relationships between the individuals and the groups they belonged to, as well as between different groups themselves as they shared a common space in the park, conditioned their collective political actions against a common enemy.

Another Brick in the Barricade includes chapters that touch upon many other issues, ranging from the use of digital technology that facilitated social mobilization at Gezi to the pseudo-intellectuals that stood by the AKP government and aimed to legitimize its counter narrative against the protestors; from the assessment of new organization theories to explain spontaneity in Gezi to theoretical readings of the radical democratic demands and acts emerging from the commune experience in the park, and to global comparisons. Such an ambitious attempt to cover as many facets of the Gezi protests as possible inevitably makes the book extremely eclectic, more than the other two books under review here. This weakness in the content is further exacerbated by some chapters which do not live up to the rigor promised by the book, and often remain as shallow descriptive accounts, or crude applications of certain theories rather than illuminating analyses of Gezi. Some of these chapters are only remotely relevant to the Gezi protests and read as if they were written for another purpose. Yet, the most frustrating aspect of the book is its poor

editorial quality. Numerous problems, including but not limited to typos, informal usage of the language (especially through contractions), grammatical errors and inconsistencies (one can find in the same chapter the use of both British and American versions of the same word), lack of uniformity in title and subtitle structure throughout different chapters, unfinished sentences, and incomprehensible phrases which read as poor translations from another language make it an excruciating reading experience for even the most motivated reader. In the absence of an attentive editorship which could have easily eliminated these problems, the book fails miserably in its promise to deliver an ambitious content.

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The three edited collections I discussed so far introduced various issues that touch upon different facets of the Gezi phenomenon without delving too much into empirical details or theoretical assessments. As a monograph, *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park* by Gürcan and Peker does exactly that, and offers in-depth critical analyses into various theoretical positions supported by rich empirical evidence. More specifically, the book is a Marxist variation of a critique of the New Social Movements literature, and takes issue with "civil society centered" explanations of social mobilization, condemning them for trading class-centered analyses with identity-based, culturally-oriented interpretations of collective action. Closely following Petras and Veltmeyer's analysis¹⁴ of social movements in Latin America, Gürcan and Peker aim to "tease out the structural and conjunctural foundations of the movement, along with its organizational/leadership mechanisms, strategic and tactical repertoires, and modes of engagement with political consciousness and cognitive transformation".¹⁵

It should be said at the outset that this overemphasis on theory has its shortcomings. While the attempt to elevate the discussion of Gezi protests to a theoretical level is important, and is often missing in an overwhelming segment of the Gezi literature, the book is overwhelmingly theory driven: a cherry-picked and eclectic array of theories ranging from Poulantzas and Wright to Harvey and Gramsci are often not tested against original empirical data collected for the study. The aspiration to engage with theory sometimes renders empirical data secondary, which is especially the case in the earlier parts of the book where the main thrust is to falsify 'liberal-minded' commentators. In sections when empirical data is at the forefront, long and detailed

14 J. Petras and H. Veltmeyer. *Social Movements in Latin America: Neoliberalism and Popular Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

15 Efe Can Gürcan and Efe Peker. *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6

(if not bloated) chronology of incidents as well as data from a number of surveys¹⁶ conducted in the early days of the Gezi protests fail to serve as evidence for the authors' theoretical assertions or conclusions.

Nevertheless, the fact that some of the chapters in the book were previously published in peer-reviewed international journals is testimony to its success in interpreting the Gezi protests to foreign audience. More importantly the book is a courageous attempt to address some thorny issues which have conditioned the debates and discussions about Gezi. By bringing a Marxist corrective to the New Social Movements literature, which they reprimand for ignoring the political economic background of what appears as cultural and ideological struggles, *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park* offers a rigorous class-based analysis of Gezi. In what follows, I will revisit some of the points Gürcan and Peker raise in their thorough discussion of Gezi as a class-based social movement, and try to assess their contribution to the theory.

One of the most interesting academic debates that surfaced during Gezi was regarding the class character of the protests. Commentators were hastily labeling the protestors depending on their political leaning and theoretical preference. Gezi was a dignity uprising, a working class revolution, a freedom struggle, a secularist reaction, a gender rebellion, and an outcry from the tech-savvy apolitical middle class all at once. The rich demographic diversity of the protestors was also making it both easy and difficult to pin the social location of a typical Gezi protestor. Gürcan and Peker make their position clear in this debate when they express their irritation by the presentation of Gezi as simply a reaction due to cultural/ideological discontent, or as an identity-based movement undertaken by an elusive category of middle-class energized by the urge to protect secularism. Instead, they offer a "class corrective" to civil-society centered explanations steeped in culturalism and essentialism often entertained by what the authors call the "(neo-)liberal left" intelligentsia. The book takes pains to demonstrate the "working-class roots" of the uprising because the majority of the protestors in Gezi Park belonged to the secular and educated fractions of "wage-earning classes" in Turkey. It is this aspect of the book that I will focus in order to be able to discuss the political implications of Gezi. While I maintain that it is important to "bring the class back in", and bring under scrutiny the political-economic context that both produces and is produced by structural and conjunctural factors, including, first and foremost, neoliberalism but also imperialism, hegemony, and different forms of authoritarian interventions by the state, the approach Gürcan and Peker adopt has at least two shortcomings:

First, we learn from the authors about Turkey's growing wage-earning population and how this group is becoming progressively more precarious as

16 KONDA. *Gezi Parkı Araştırması* 2013; GENAR. *Gezi Parkı Profili* 2013; MetroPOLL. *Gezi Parkı Protestoları* 2013; E. E. Bilgiç and Z. Kafkaslı, "Gencim, Özgürlükçüyüm, Ne İstiyorum?" Bilgi University 2013

they are employed mostly in the service sector, toil long hours, have low rates of unionization, are burdened under increasing levels of consumer debt, and overall demonstrate a very low level of life satisfaction.¹⁷ Yet the authors simply project this template on Gezi Park protestors, assuming that those in the park must be exact representative of the broader picture. Yet, this type of extrapolation might be too mechanistic to understand the actual conditions and motivations of the protestors in Gezi and other parts of the country where people protested the government for various reasons. Fixating the social base of this particular uprising to the assumed working-class background of the participants becomes a disservice to the attempts to unpack the complexity of this historical episode.

Second, in their attempt to demonstrate the class base of the protestors, Gürcan and Peker seem to switch their interpretation of class between these wage-earners' relation to capital in the production process (hence subscribing to the Marxist conceptualization of class) and their progressively declining socio-economic status (a Weberian conceptualization). Thus the book implies that even though the expressions of their frustration might involve secular anxiety, it is through these material experiences of increasing socio-economic marginalization that motivate the protestors against the government. However, when the class analysis on the social base of the protestors is reduced to a monochromatic characterization of material exploitation and precarization, the richness of the class experience of the proletariat (or those who are increasingly precaritized) in the face of marginalization and dispossession is lost. In other words, while highlighting the class background of the protestors and the political-economic context that paved the way to the protests is an important analytical endeavor in itself, simply demonstrating the process of proletarianization and how various fractions of the wage-earning classes are increasingly precaritized does that explain what gave Gezi its unique and diverse character. Yet this very richness of experience and experimentation was what gave Gezi its complexity and the vivid colors with which the protestors from different walks of life painted this carnivalesque episode. We know from more recent studies¹⁸ that the wage-earners' class experience can not be captured simply by focusing on their material conditions, but by understanding the social, cultural, ethical and psychological conditions in which they create their subjectivity and activate their agency. In other words, while the class structure of the society is revealed in everyday manifestations of objective relations (such as exploitation,

17 Gürcan and Peker, *Challenging Neoliberalism*, 44-46

18 For two of such studies that focus on the experiences of the working class in Turkey, see A. Birelma. *Emek ve Haysiyet Mücadelesi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014); D. Dinler. *İşçinin Varlık Problemi* (Istanbul: Metis, 2014)

discrimination, dispossession, or inequality, among others), the ways through which these manifestations are experienced, interpreted and acted upon by individuals take place in their subjective conditions which are almost always shaped by their cultural and ideological universe. This is why the cries for justice, dignity, solidarity, freedom, anti-authoritarianism or secularism that found themselves in songs, poems, slogans, tweets, and street graffiti in Gezi as expressions of frustration or motivation were not plain derivatives of class relations in a narrow sense. Nor were they simply, in the authors' words, "a secularly oriented class reaction to Islamically legitimated neoliberalism in the particularity of Turkey".¹⁹ Had they enriched their analysis with, for instance, feminist, anarchist, ecologist and similar other perspectives bolstered with ethnographic inquiry, Gürcan and Peker's could have shed a brighter light on the complexity of Gezi without compromising the class character or experiences of the protestors. A theoretical expansion – similar to the one discussed above – in the political-economic foundations of class relations behind Gezi could have improved the analysis in *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park* to help the reader better grasp, without succumbing into the culturalist and essentialist generalizations, why it was the attempted construction of 3Ms (a mosque, mall, military barracks) in a place like Taksim that kindled the fire in Gezi Park.

If class is one key aspect to think about the distinctiveness of the Gezi protests, another is the issue of organization, more specifically, its leaderlessness. Those familiar with the studies that examine the most recent cycle of protests around the world would immediately notice that the relevant body of literature is fascinated by what they interpret as the leaderless, spontaneous character of these uprisings. During Gezi, the protests were not necessarily "spontaneous or leaderless" as people wanted to see it, but it was a "collective will" that planned and led the movement. Unlikely alliances among individuals and groups were established with the involvement of many organizations as diverse as the *Çarşı*, RedHack, CHP, DISK, KESK, TMMOB, TTB, IP, TKP, TGB, Taksim Solidarity, Socialist Feminist Collective, and LGBT groups. While they individually may not have assumed a clear leadership position in the overall movement, it would be wrong to deny the fact that they acted in harmony, and collectively influenced the direction of the protests. Gürcan and Peker, too, agree that Gezi was a collective action pursued by collective leadership which comprised various "repertoires of action" that have been utilized, reinvented and created anew during the protests. Many collective leadership structures emerged during and after the protests became catalyst for the unleashing of a rich process of meaning creation (what the authors call

19 Ibid., 51

“repertoire cultivation”) that eventually became the basis of the construction of an alternative political consciousness against the neoliberal Islamist hegemony imposed by the AKP government over the years. Social media tools was also instrumental in integrating seemingly spontaneous masses with the collective leadership mechanisms. They created virtual communities to underpin various forms of collective action and leadership, interaction, meaning creation, and solidarity.

All in all, *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey’s Gezi Park* is both a theory-propelled and empirically rich work even though it sometimes fails to establish a sound, balanced link between the two. The authors’ ambition to tackle the theory, and courage to expand (if not reinvent) the conceptual toolbox available to the students of social movements is commendable, even when this becomes too schematic, if not sterilized, in their attempt to shed a different light on the Gezi protests. Although their aim to put class antagonism in neoliberal Turkey (what they define as “neoliberalism with Islamic characteristics”) at the center of their investigation of Gezi can at times become far-fetched, that does not diminish the value of their contribution to our understanding of the Gezi protests.

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It is safe to argue that the ultimate question that underlie both the edited volumes (more in some chapters than others) and *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey’s Gezi Park* is the political meaning and future potential of the Gezi protests for the construction of a new, more democratic, more inclusive political life in Turkey. It is hard to miss the bitter irony, though: as all students of contemporary Turkish politics and society well know, the pace and magnitude of social change in a very short span of time in the country can be overwhelming. Having been published within only two years of the Gezi protests, one can still feel the intensity and excitement the events left on the editors and authors. None of them could predict the deterioration of the political climate and the authoritarian backlash from the political establishment in the following years. In stark contrast to the mix of pessimism, fear and rage that permeate growing segments of the society at the time of this writing, the overall mood in these books is one of awe, optimism, and anticipation for the possibility of a democratic reorganization in the Turkish society.

This is all the more reason to revisit the arguments and overarching enthusiasm in these books to adjudicate upon the potential of political activism in the post-Gezi era in Turkey. Despite their shortcomings, these books are fine reminders that Gezi was not simply a political event with a definite beginning and an end, but a political process – even a movement – that raises tough questions for those who take this potential seriously: How should the anti-authoritarian and extra-parliamentary character of the Gezi protests, and

the new political consciousness that have emerged from it, be interpreted when the strategic epicenter of the protests was not capturing state power? What should we make of the alternative vision of democracy and peaceful co-existence emerging from Gezi, which was collectively dreamed, negotiated and insurrected by so many different groups? What would be the political horizon of such a total objection against many issues at once, including precarization, sectarian and ethnic discrimination, conservative oppression, sexism, environmental degradation, urban gentrification, and police violence, to name a few? Will the accumulated political experience in Gezi pave the way for the emergence of a new form of politics, with potential to evolve into a more coherent political community aware of the surrounding local and national issues, and of its potential to address these issues through ways that offer an alternative to traditional politics?

Answering these and other questions is imperative yet not an easy task as we realize, looking back after five years, that Gezi was many things all at once: a beginning and an end, a trigger and a culmination, a rupture and a transition. Regardless, Gezi completely changed the language, grammar, perception, and imagination of politics in Turkey. It deservedly became a milestone, an extended watershed event without which no analysis of Turkish politics and society would be complete.