

# ***THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING***



*On the Gezi Park Resistance of June 2013*





*Dancing at the Gezi Commune*





**O**n May 28, 2013 those who had been long-involved in defending Gezi Park were clinging to trees, desperately trying to stop the bulldozers, mostly out of blind-conviction and definitely not because they thought they actually had a winning chance.

But the days which followed not only blew apart their reality, and every single other person's in Turkey, but also ushered in the largest, most diffuse and popular rebellion in the country's history.

As the defining moment for a generation in Turkey, the Gezi Park uprising was inundated with a collective form of joy particular to such rebellions. It manifested itself spontaneously with new twists at every turn. While at the time of this publication it might appear that it has lost steam, there is no question that a daring and mischievous spirit of rebellion and resistance has been released into Turkey's society with consequences still unknown.

The following pages contain four pieces written on the Gezi Resistance. The first two were written by Ali Bektaş during the uprising and some of their faults can be attributed to their immediacy. The anonymous contribution to Rolling Thunder #11 and that by Ali B. for Occupied London #5, were written in August 2013.

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### ***Burnt-out media trucks in front of the Atatürk Cultural Center***

CNN Turkey chose to broadcast documentaries about penguins instead of reporting on what was happening on the ground during the first few days of the rebellion. The general black-out (and AKP line-towing) by the mass media led the resistance to take matters into their own hands. Demonstrations were organized in front of TV and newspaper offices and the media was attacked on the ground. In addition, people quickly assumed the identity of penguins with graffiti and stencils depicting them as the vanguard of the resistance.

# Istanbul Uprising

## *The Flip-side of the Anti-Capitalist Coin*

**I**t seemed as if the world had entered the age of the austerity riots. And then Istanbul erupted. Let there be no mistake, Istanbul cannot be lumped in with Athens, Barcelona, Lisbon or New York. What is happening in Turkey is the flip-side of the anti-capitalist coin. It is an uprising against development. It is a street battle for cities that belong to people and not Capital. It is resistance against an authoritarian regime emboldened by an economic boom. What we are seeing unfold in the streets of Istanbul is a convergence between Turkey's small but growing anti-authoritarian left who has been organizing socially relevant campaigns in recent years and a large section of the urban population loyal to the Kemalist ideals of modernism, secularism and nationalism. This being said, the situation in Turkey is extremely complex and necessitates an understanding of many different political situations that have been developing over the past decade.

## Taksim

As many may already know, the origin of the current uprising stems from the proposed development of a park near Taksim Square, in the heart of Istanbul. The development of Gezi Park is only one part of a massive urban renewal project the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has put forth for the city and country as a whole. It includes gentrifying schemes for the cities poorest neighborhoods such as Tarlabaşı, the construction of a third bridge to connect the two continents that Istanbul spans and even a massive plan to open up a second channel connecting the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, to facilitate containerized shipping, which has been referred to as Erdoğan's "crazy project". The neighborhood of Taksim is where a great number of city development projects are happening and where there is a rich tradition of rebellion and protest. To put things into context it is useful to look at the significance of Taksim Square as a point of rebellion and convergence.

On May 1st 1977, half a million workers and revolutionaries flooded Taksim Square for one of the most epic demonstrations to date. This demonstration came six years after a bloody coup wherein three Turkish student revolutionaries, accused of being enemies of the state, were hung by a military tribunal. Their memory immortalized, the Turkish Left picked up from where the executed revolutionaries had left off plunging into the seventies with force and multiplying in numbers. During that year's demonstrations, 34 people were killed in the square by what is believed to be paramilitary gunmen on roofs as well as during the ensuing panic. In addition to being the gateway to Beyoğlu, the most culturally vibrant part of the Istanbul, with probably more bars and cafes per square meter than any other city in Europe, Taksim Square has also carried this particular tragic memory since the 1977 massacre.

The riots that have taken place most Maydays in Istanbul over the past seven years have all centered

around protesters attempting to reach Taksim Square. The first of these clashes was in 2007 when the Turkish Left wanted to commemorate the massacre on its 30th anniversary. The state prevented this and far-left militants fought back in the streets with molotov cocktails and rocks. The situation was the same up until 2011, two years ago when the government finally realized its mistake and allowed the left to have the square for the day.

But things have developed since two years ago, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government decided to introduce their massive urban renewal project for Istanbul which also included a re-visioning of the square. Under the rhetoric of making the square a pedestrian zone, the Erdoğan government (which is also in charge of the municipality of Istanbul) adopted plans, without any input from residents, to dismantle large swathes of Taksim to construct various shopping malls and development projects for the rich. The battle over holding demonstrations in Taksim on Mayday resumed this year as the state decided to use the redevelopment of the square as an excuse to prevent protests from taking place. Gezi Park, the focal point of the current rebellion is being slated for demolition to make way for the construction of a replica Ottoman-era army barracks, Topçu Kışlası, that will most likely be used for commercial purposes. It is not a coincidence for the AKP government, with its roots in Islam, that the original barracks were the site of a major Islamic uprising in 1909. This comes in addition to a decision to name the third bridge after Sultan Yavuz Selim, infamous for the mass-murders of the Alevi population of Anatolia.

Those who have been defending Gezi Park have been at it for a long time. In addition to large trade-unions, many participants come from a relatively newer independent left, with younger generations embracing more anti-authoritarian ecological tendencies with an emphasis on "right to the city" kind of activism. They all converge under the grouping of the Taksim Solidarity Platform, which focuses on preventing the transformation

of the city into an even more elaborate capitalist playground built upon public space. This was not their first campaign against urban renewal. Two months ago clashes broke out between filmmakers who were trying to save a famed Turkish cinema, Emek, from becoming yet another shopping mall and police who deployed pepper spray and water cannons. It is also important to note that some of the main protagonists who are involved in the fight for Gezi Park are also those behind immigrant solidarity demonstrations and actions such as providing free meals for migrants or organizing demonstrations in front of immigrant detention centers in Istanbul.

The fight to save Gezi Park was not in the public consciousness of Turkey until the police raided it two mornings in a row on May 29th and 30th. Outrage at the brutality of the police was the spark which lit the whole country on fire and transformed the struggle into a nation-wide rebellion against the current government.

## **Neoliberal Islam**

The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) should be contextualized within the transforming geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. They have strong roots in political Islam and continue the tradition of other political parties from the 1990s that had been suppressed by the military, sometimes while in power. In fact Erdoğan himself previously has been imprisoned for inciting the public to “Islamic sedition.” The stated aspiration of Erdoğan and his cadre is that of “The Neo-Ottoman Project” which aims to make Turkey the economic and political powerhouse of the Middle East and North Africa. Erdoğan’s political power-plays in Syria and Libya must be contextualized within these aspirations.

Unlike the European Union or Western states, Turkey has seen a massive economic boom (with annual growth rates of almost 10%) in the recent years. Even though both the trade deficit and real unemployment is running high and massive

privatization is selling off what is left in the hands of the public, the crisis is being contained in Turkey and the current government is riding high on this situation. This is perhaps what sets the revolt of Istanbul apart. This is a revolt against boom-time development, destructive urban renewal projects and the hyper-modernization of cities. The Istanbul uprising illustrates the opposite pole in the ongoing fight against capitalism, and complements the struggles against austerity of recent years.

Turkey was one of the prime targets of the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s, during which then prime minister Turgut Özal facilitated massive privatization schemes targeting its factories, mines and the overall infrastructure of the country. The AKP government, and Erdoğan in particular was successful in bringing that neoliberal regime into the 21st century, shrouded by an Islamist populism. In addition, he successfully promoted Turkish firms with Islamic bases, as a neoliberal force in the global marketplace. This can be most notably seen in Northern Iraq where the major source of capital is in fact Turkish. We should remember that the Turkish model has been proposed by Western powers as a possible way out of the uprisings that marked the Arab Spring. Thanks to those fighting during the past days in the streets of Turkey that neoliberal Islamic model has now been thrown into serious question.

## **Ergenekon and the Kurdish Struggle**

Erdoğan’s aspirations have not been totally uncontested and there have been various threats against his regime, notably from a cadre of generals and intellectuals who see themselves as defenders of the Turkish secular nation-state and who have sent various warning signals to Erdoğan in recent years. The most significant counter-reaction from Erdoğan came when he launched a multi-city police operation against dozens of members of the military, intellectuals and public figures with allegations of

organizing a coup against his government. These police operations, and resulting criminal cases against the conspiracy known as Ergenekon are ongoing. It is imperative to realize the significance of these arrests and resulting court proceedings. Unprecedented for a nation brought up on successive military coups, the arrests and trials of high ranking military officials and others were met with rallies and demos around Turkey as huge crowds embroiled by the ascent of the AKP defended the secular old-guard elite. These arrests and imprisonments are also why there still has not been a response to the current situation from the Turkish military, traditionally a major player in Turkish politics. The proliferation of the Turkish nationalist sentiment in the current uprising is a direct consequence of the past years' so-called "flag-demos" or "Rallies for the Republic" that the nationalist center-left parties have been staging against the AKP government. At this current moment of the rebellion we are witnessing the opportunism of these opposition political forces as they try to exert influence over what has so far been a true people's uprising.

Any analysis of the Turkish uprising must consider the relationship with the Kurdish movement for liberation. The center-point of Turkish politics for the past two decades has undoubtedly been the Kurdish guerrilla warfare for autonomy launched by the PKK in 1978. Over the past months, Erdoğan has effectively brokered a peace deal with the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in a Turkish island-prison since 1999. Erdoğan is attempting to position himself as the leader who solved the most pressing issue in the country. This has not only led him to assume a *carte-blanche* in Turkish politics (his regime has brutally oppressed and imprisoned various leftists and other opposition figures in recent years) but also to portray himself as a peacemaker between two ethnicities. The recently re-energized convergence of a large segment of the Turkish Left with the Kurdish movement has become more fragile due to the deal making

conducted by Erdoğan as people are suspicious of how the peace process plays into his neo-Ottoman ideas.

This is perhaps one of the biggest questions of the moment: how will the movement in the streets congeal and what kind of relationship will it have with the Kurdish struggle? The great majority of those who initiated the occupation of Gezi Park and who have been fighting Erdoğan's vision of developing Istanbul are in full solidarity with the Kurdish people. But the masses that have flooded the streets with the Turkish flags are a different story. At best, they are critical of Erdoğan using the Kurdish peace process to strengthen his hold on power and at worst, they are blatant racists who see Kurds as terrorists. Despite this danger, recent developments in the street are promising. People are reporting witnessing both Turkish flags and flags with Öcalan's portrait being displayed together or the intertwining of chants that both emphasize the fraternity between different ethnicities and ones celebrating the national identity of Turkey.

## **Creeping Social Conservatism**

The uprising against Erdoğan is fueled by a creeping Islamic conservatism pushed by the AKP in order to cultivate its base. These conservative policies have manifested in various realms such as cutting access to abortions and birth control, tighter control of the internet and communication, restrictions and taxes on alcohol consumption and the state-sponsored amplification of Islamic holidays. These policies have been met with demonstrations of thousands in the same streets where the rebellion is centered and have been the predecessors for the current malcontent.

Erdoğan's personal style as a prime minister, is a major factor influencing the visceral anger witnessed in the streets. In almost every public speech, whether it be at a political rally or a TV interview, Erdoğan attacks, threatens and is condescending towards

every social-political segment except his own. This ranges from blatant insults to dismissals with the rabid tones of a mad-dog politician. His latest statements during the uprising were exemplary and only add fuel to the fire for those in the streets who he arrogantly characterized as “a handful of marauders and extremists.”

The crucial link between the conservative cultural policy of AKP and its economic neoliberal policy must be revealed so that the Kemalist middle class who is heavily participating in the uprising realizes that they cannot push back cultural conservatism without challenging the economic policies. If successful, this would win over the poorer classes currently more inclined to support the AKP on a cultural basis.

The first days of this people’s uprising have been totally spontaneous and outside the control of any political parties. All of the contradictions, for example between radical leftists and Turkish nationalists, were momentarily put aside to fight the police and build barricades to hold the squares and boulevards of Istanbul. What remains to be seen is whether or not large-scale public spaces such as Gezi Park and Taksim Square will provide the venue for these contradictions to come into revolutionary dialogue and construct an unstoppable movement in Turkey.





*“You know your government has failed when your grandma starts to RIOT”*

*Istanbul Internet Meme*

*published on June 14, 2013 by Salon*

# “I’ve gone to resist, I’ll be right back”

*Against the Dictatorship of Development*

The struggle that exploded on May 31 to fight neoliberal urban renewal — and specifically the demolition of a park in central Istanbul — has surpassed its original goals, and transformed into a full fledged uprising against a democratically elected yet authoritarian regime. Although it began in Gezi Park, which neighbors the central square of Istanbul, Taksim Square, the uprising has quickly spread across the city and to the whole country.

Unrelenting in their determination to stay in the streets, huge crowds have also gathered day after day in Ankara and Izmir as well as in other smaller cities. Three demonstrators have died and four others are currently in critical condition. This is in addition to more than 6000 injured people, including 10 who have lost eyes. The uprising has dominated the national discourse for more than two weeks as the country goes through the largest and longest urban popular revolt it has ever seen. It is now being regarded as a momentous political awakening for a

whole generation.

On the ground, there is only one term that is used to describe the greatly heterogeneous crowds protesting in Turkey for weeks: the resistance. Resistance against short-sighted urban development, resistance against the police and resistance against the authoritarian regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, in power for more than ten years. Nearly all the relevant Twitter hashtags follow the command form of resistance, “#Diren,” and multiply depending on what the location or topic is. Shop owners leave notes explaining “I’ve gone to resist, I’ll be right back,” and one of the most common chants is “Everywhere Taksim! Everywhere Resistance!” It feels as if the whole of Taksim, the bohemian cultural center of Istanbul and the site of historically landmark political events, is part of the resistance and almost everyone walks around with goggles and dust masks to protect themselves from the generously dispensed teargas.

## **Barricades of Transformation**

For ten days, between the first and tenth of June, all of the main arteries and smaller side streets leading up to Taksim Square were barricaded in defense against the police. In some avenues such as Gumussuyu, where battles raged at the beginning of the uprising, more than a dozen barricades were present. Some of these reached three meters high, constructed from every kind of urban debris: construction materials, destroyed city buses and rebar cemented to cinder blocks sticking out towards the enemy lines in a surreal medieval fashion. Similar to other popular urban uprisings, the barricades sealed the area from the state and opened a space where a brand new set of previously unimaginable social relations could take shape.

Signs strung up between light poles on the streets leading up to Taksim Square

and Gezi Park read “This way to the Taksim Commune.” This might be somewhat of an overstatement but is certainly more true within the park proper where solidarity and mutual aid has become the norm. Person after person speaks of this new existence they have discovered in that beautiful space absent from the state where cooperation, solidarity and struggle have superseded the poisonous society they have left behind. Tense arguments that emerge between individuals of opposing political ideologies, or disruptive drunken people are quickly calmed down to a more sober state of mind. People have seen that social violence was effectively reduced with the absence of the police. This is particularly the case for women participants, who make up at least half if not more of those who occupy Gezi Park. Not only has the cat calling and sexual violence usually common in Taksim been reduced but women and anti-sexist men have claimed an important space to fight patriarchy going as far as intervening in chants, slogans and graffiti that utilize sexist language to attack Erdoğan or the AKP.

For almost two weeks now flags of the PKK (the powerful Kurdish guerilla group) have been flying together with flags of the Turkish Republic over Taksim Square. This previously unimaginable situation is only possible because both Kurds and Kemalists have been united against a common enemy, the police and the AKP government. One Kurdish student commented that this was the real peace process as opposed to the opportunistic process put into place by Erdoğan over the past year. It is telling of the nature of the conflict with the Kurds that the absence of the state from the streets of Taksim has nurtured the space for people to actually talk and listen to each other.

The first weekend at the barricades saw two mass demonstrations. On Saturday, June 8th, soccer fans from the three major clubs in Istanbul, Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray converged upon the square in a major show of force. These

fans, previously at war with each other, now gather under Istanbul United and have provided much needed energy to the street battles. Amongst them shines Çarşı , being the most organized, clever and with previous experience intervening in political situations. But they are staunchly apolitical, in the sense that they don't support any of the political parties, and say that their "rebel spirit" is with the people. In fact they are ideologically confused and alternate between nationalist symbols and singing Bella Ciao, all within a kind of male-dominated left-wing populism. Their participation has been key since they come very well organized, in high numbers and have experience acting together from the stadium. It is no wonder that soccer fans of Istanbul, who represent a great cross section of the urban population would be present for a struggle in defense of the city.

The next day, on June 9th, there was a much larger gathering in Taksim. According to some estimates almost a million people were present and it was much more leftist in character. Many people claim that this might have been the largest crowd Taksim Square has ever seen, including the legendary workers rallies of the 70s.

## **Erdoğan and Cheap Propaganda Tactics**

The words coming from Erdoğan have been getting more and more absurdly false as he is clearly in the middle of his government's biggest crisis. Defending his police force and trying to downplay his extreme repression, he claimed that 17 people were killed by the US police during the Occupy movement. Naturally the US embassy quickly rejected this. He even stated that the many injured who flooded into a nearby mosque on the third day of the uprising were actually getting drunk inside. The imam of the mosque quickly denied this. His rhetoric, while filled with lies and just as rabid as always, has in fact shifted as his administration

is clearly trying to manage this crisis. At first, he thought he could just insult those in the park by claiming they were "marauders" (capulcu) and "drunks," implicitly pitting them against those who were good, practicing Muslims. Once again those in the park showed their wit and disarmed the government by owning this term and everyone started to call themselves a capulcu. In addition, the positive vibe within the park with its kitchens, libraries, urban farms etc. started to be shown across social media and even amongst the mainstream Turkish media who at first had outright ignored the protests. This successfully combated the government sponsored propaganda that the encampment was a urine smelling cesspool and it became clear that there were much more than "drunks" at Gezi Park. This initial tactic had backfired.

The next strategy employed by the AKP government was to foment an already creeping division between what they have labelled as "provocateurs" (read: those who fight back when the police attack) or more generally "marginal groups" (read: small militant leftist groups) and so-called "environmentalist youth trying to save trees" (imagine: a clueless, naive environmentalist teenager). This is a completely artificial division. Many different kinds of people have been fighting the police. It's not exactly clear who these "marginal groups" are but many small leftist groups are part of the Taksim Solidarity Platform (those who organized the initial encampment of the park). And no such well-intentioned yet naive environmentalist youth can be found in the park. In addition, the initial movement to save the park was much more than an innocent effort to save trees and was, in fact, a struggle for public space and against enclosure. Despite it being an artificial division, this tactic has been somewhat more successful for the government since there is not exactly a consensus on how to deal with police violence.

Those who have been active in social movements in the past have surely seen both these tactics previously deployed as they are part and

parcel of the playbook used by the state. First there is an attempt to discredit those in the streets or in the occupations. But if the movement is too popular the next step is to try and split them by furthering divisions and labeling some of them as extremists and others as naive and being used merely as cover. Marginality becomes an ever receding horizon that is never extinguished until there is no one left to resist.

## **Taking Back the Square for the Final Attack**

On Tuesday June 11th the police made their move to take back Taksim Square. Clearly this was the necessary step before any attempt was made to take back the neighboring park from those occupying it. At 7am, the police entered the square. The barricades were insufficient without people behind them to defend their position at that early hour. Despite this, some from the park and the square fought against the police to the best of their abilities throughout the day. The square was lost within the hour and most of the clashes took place on the main avenue (now one of the construction sites that are part of Erdogan's development of the square) alongside Gezi Park.

The police repeatedly launched teargas into the park despite many promises given that the park would be left alone from police attack. The incredible self-organization of the park had already outdone itself and those resisting improved their method of dealing with the gas canisters. Realizing that all of Taksim was the site of resistance it became apparent that throwing the canisters back to the police had little effect in getting rid of the gas that filled the neighborhood. Instead, buckets of water, sand and wet blankets were distributed around the encampment and canisters were quickly extinguished as soon as they fell.

The Taksim Solidarity Platform put out a call for people to converge at 7pm and tens of thousands of people started marching into the square that

evening. Shortly after the square was full, the police decided to disperse the crowd with an incredible amount of teargas and water cannons. Thankfully, this completely unprepared and peaceful crowd kept their calm and another fatal stampede, such as that which took place on Mayday of 1977, was not repeated. People were pushed down various streets off the square and kept advancing towards the police lines only to be pushed back with more tear gas and water cannons. This went on until around four am. At one point the police entered the park with hundreds of riot police and destroyed tents and various infrastructure around the entrance. In response a large barricade was erected at the entrance of the park as a first line of defense against the police.

## **Laughter against Fear**

The government's regime of fear has been met with an unprecedented public demonstration of humor. The streets surrounding Taksim and the offshoot neighborhood of Beyoğlu have been covered in graffiti since the uprising began. The content of this overwhelming amount of graffiti has thrown almost everyone off guard as it shows the incredible wit of those in the streets. The humor of the movement does not take away from its determination and instead gives it the necessary spiritual ammunition to keep going. If not crying from teargas, people are in tears from laughing at the next graffiti around the corner teasing Erdoğan.

The particular flavor of this humor comes from a series of weekly satirical magazines which date back to the period marked by the military coups of 1971 and 1980. Faced with the iron fist and gaze of military rule, these magazines developed a way of criticizing power under the cover of satire. This comic tradition has met web 2.0 era memes as well as snippets from popular culture. Also noteworthy is that most of these magazines have their offices in Taksim and are intertwined with the cultural life of those streets. This satirical culture developed itself into

the 1990s and 2000s and has now exploded on the streets of Istanbul. Most people following the events are aware of the numerous wordplays and memes constructed on the Turkish word for “marauders” (Capulcu). But “everyday I’m capulling!” is only the tip of the comic iceberg. Unfortunately, a lot of the other examples are nearly impossible to translate.

## **A Crisis of Representation**

At every moment during these past days there seems to be yet another group of artists, intellectuals or actors, who encouraged by Erdoğan, see it upon themselves to try to mediate between the spontaneous masses and the government. Despite such a theater of negotiation, the prime minister has continuously moved on to give his next publicly issued threat while emphasizing that his patience is running out.

The frustration of those in power who cannot find a leader or representative to negotiate with and thus extinguish the movement is apparent. The totally spontaneous and leaderless nature of those in the streets, devoid of any decision making structure, has perhaps been its greatest strength. Now that the struggle has surpassed its initial goal to save the park, even the Taksim Solidarity Platform, who arguably are the single group that could attempt to assume a leadership role in the struggle, is being fervently criticized for meeting with the prime minister and accepting a referendum that would not have any legal basis on the future of the park. What those who are negotiating with the prime minister seem to not realize is that this situation has far surpassed the issue of the park and the government is now faced with the will of those in the streets and not a handful of famous people or political organizations.

## **Preparing for a Final Battle**

Now that the square has been lost to the police, those in the park are waiting for the final attack and attempt to take back the park. Each night there is a

tense standoff as everybody dons masks and helmets and writes their blood-type on their body. The determination of the thousands keeping watch is amazing. They have been through it before and tear gas is something that they now joke about.

Daily, there are statements from the Istanbul governor that nobody’s safety can be guaranteed, accompanied by Orwellian tweets about how lovely the atmosphere of the occupation is with the scent of linden trees and the sound of birds singing in the early morning. Even further insulting is the infantilizing rhetoric of the authorities who continually call upon the parents of those in the square to ask their children to return home since they will be hurt. In response to these threats, dozens of mothers have publicly joined their children in resistance in recent days. The psychological warfare employed by the government is certainly of high caliber but so are the organic responses.

The resistance appears determined, at the very least, to hold their ground and not leave the park without putting up a fight. And every night, thousands more come from work to join those who are permanently camped out despite being harassed and detained by the police for having respirators and helmets. Being such a young movement with relatively little experience in street-level organization makes it very difficult for the crowds in the park to withstand a full-on police attack. The collective strategy at this point is to make it as politically costly for the government to do that as possible. What happens the day after an eviction is of course another question. But most importantly, the genie is now out of the bottle in Turkey, and a whole new cross-section of youth have found each other and begun to dream of what they can achieve together.









### Graffiti from the streets of Istanbul

1. Until you run out of gray paint
2. Bakunin was here
3. This gas got us high
4. Freedom for the headscarf and for alcohol
5. There is a beautiful world back here
6. Nice barricade homie
7. If we were scared of gas we wouldn't fart
8. I chapul, therefore I am - Descartes
9. Tayyip deleted us from his Facebook





## May 1, 1977

Hundreds of thousands of workers and students have flooded Taksim Square. A bloody military coup had suppressed the first wave of revolutionaries six years prior only to leave the stage to a new and even more determined generation. The square is fraught with sectarian divisions as Maoists are posed with a conflict against the Stalinist Left. That day these divisions would be exploited for a paramilitary attack on the crowd leaving 34 people dead from snipers on roofs and the resulting stampede. In the background is the Atatürk Cultural Center where the Confederation of Revolutionary Worker Unions (DISK) have hung a massive banner depicting their idealized factory worker, arms stretched out, one shackled by his chains and the other holding the red flag.



## June 8, 2013

Soccer fans of the three major clubs from Istanbul converge on Taksim Square to celebrate the liberation of Gezi Park from the state. It is a rare moment of unity for fans who are usually at war with each other. At their helm is Çarşı, the popular fan club of Beşiktaş. Despite having the circle-A on their logo (previous iterations also carried a hammer and sickle), they do not identify as anarchists. The circle-A is more representative of their “rebel spirit.” Çarşı defines itself as apolitical in the sense that it does not support any political party or ideology yet they have a history of participating in May Day and anti-war demonstrations and opening political banners in their stadium. One of their main slogans is “ÇARŞI: Against everything, including itself.” Çarşı gained a lot of respect during the resistance both for their bravery in street fighting and by providing a terrain for the soccer fans of all three major Istanbul clubs to unite against the police, putting aside their previous mutual hostility. Hung from the top of the Atatürk Cultural Center is a banner with an image of the late “Optik,” one of the founders of Çarşı... once again with arms stretched out, but this time not shackled and instead beckoning the roaring chants.







*Teargas in Taksim Square surrounds the Monument to the Republic*

# Addicted to Teargas

*After Gezi Nothing is the Same*

I look around and can't fathom what has become of this place, of the streets where I grew up. Where I went on my first date and went to my first protest, where I had my first drink sitting on the curb, where my friends and I periodically got into trouble. It was all on these streets of Beyoğlu. Now, we are thousands and thousands taunting the police in unison, chanting for them to gas us so we can get going. And then finally it arrives; the canisters are flying in one after another. We are so used to it by now that it is almost a relief to smell the gas; our first reaction is to cheer the arrival of the burning sensation. There's no panic and no one is running. We make a slow retreat of a few dozen meters before the materials to construct the first barricade of the evening are brought to the forefront. This is the beginning of a two-day battle to take back the square. We've all lost count, but probably the fifth or sixth such battle since the end of May.

The AKP government, with Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan at its helm, took power in Turkey ten years ago and set upon its long-term project of transforming the country into an exemplary Islamic neo-liberal stronghold. The latest stage of Sultan Erdoğan's vision has been a concerted attack on Istanbul through a number of urban transformation projects, which would enclose the remaining public spaces in the city. One of these was to destroy Gezi Park to make way for a commercial shopping complex in the heart of the city, Taksim Square, effectively erasing the long history and culture associated with that space.

Two months prior, in April, there were only about 300 of us at Gezi as part of a day-long festival to fight the development of the park. At that time myself and my comrades acknowledged that we were in yet another losing fight, after having been through so many. There was some energy, but we were mostly just the usual suspects. It was hard not to be cynical. At least we made a stand, we told ourselves; hopefully history will remember that some were opposed to what Istanbul was slated to become. It was just as depressing as every previous moment of the five years of AKP rule. It felt like there was no space to move, to breathe even, as Erdoğan consolidated his power in the government and his grip on our lives.

Although at home it felt more and more claustrophobic, those observing Turkey from afar, especially the pundits of politics and economy, kept iterating the successes of the Turkish miracle. "More than 10% annual growth rate!" "Look at Greece and Spain, Turkey is doing amazing!" Yes Turkey has been spared the austerity measures that have been implemented in countries such as Portugal, Spain and Greece but this has been at the cost of another crisis-fighting strategy, extreme urban development through the enclosure of the city. Although initially hit by the financial crisis in 2008, the AKP government was able to keep a full fiscal blowout at bay by attracting foreign liquid capital in a scheme intrinsically tied to its urban development projects such as the development of Gezi Park.

As I observed the hundreds of thousands around me in Taksim Square I couldn't help but project that this might be the crucial turn from the austerity riots of the past years. Gezi, at least partly, was an uprising against the enclosure of the city in a time of an economic boom instead of one demanding a return to the Keynesian dream. That being said, the clock is ticking on the Turkish economy and much of the foreign debt holders will come knocking on the door soon. One can only hope that a population having struggled during boom-time development won't settle for a return to liquidity once a financial crisis brings about austerity.

## Recovering from Left Trauma

Taksim Square is a heavy place for my parents' generation. My uncles and aunts have told me the story of the Taksim Square massacre on May Day 1977, when snipers on rooftops and the ensuing panic killed 34 people. Since then, Taksim Square has been the hotly contested zone of May Day celebrations; many of the demonstrations of the past five years have become street battles to take the square. Despite the ritualistic nature of these protests, they were instrumental in injecting life into a Left that had found itself in a rut, powerless.

At first, my relatives hadn't wanted to talk about the old militant student movement, though they had been integral to it. They claimed to have moved on from that period of their lives. But it was clear to me that rather than having moved on or even sold out, they had been crushed by the successive military coups of 1971 and 1980. Thousands of leftist students were rounded up, imprisoned, and tortured by the military regimes. In addition to dozens of extrajudicial paramilitary killings, military tribunals hanged more than 50 people. The trauma of the iron fist still hangs over the society in Turkey and has been blamed for the "apolitical" culture of my generation, those born in the 80s and 90s.

This apolitical generation, cursed by what preceded it, created seemingly out of thin air the

most defiant, longest lasting, and diffuse popular uprising in the history of the country. Older leftists are still trying to wrap their heads around this. The joyful rebellion did not fit into their stale frameworks; it did not compute with their Trotskys and Lenins.

This was the beauty of the Gezi resistance. That nobody saw it coming. Not one person or group in Turkey can claim with a straight face that they predicted what transpired at the end of May and into June. The euphoria that dominated the streets of Istanbul had a lot to do with the unexpectedness of the revolt. Millions of people had their wildest wishes fulfilled overnight as if by a magical insurrectionary genie. Isolation and depression evaporated instantly as people found each other in the tear gas.

## Commune

Gezi Park was a beautiful commune for almost two weeks. Spontaneity and autonomy were the rules of the game; after the park was retaken, the first tents went up with the initiative of small groups of friends. The whole park rapidly filled with tents to sleep in and dozens of larger structures hosting almost every single leftist or activist group. Mutual aid was the order of this utopia. Starry-eyed old-timers and fresh militants were living a dream come true. Leaving their normal existence behind for the time being, people who had never imagined a world without the police were impressed to discover a more harmonious society in the absence of the state.

The encampment at Gezi Park bore some similarities to the experience of Occupy in the US. It was an experiment in self-organization: free stores (called Revolutionary Markets), libraries, a permaculture space, workshops, multiple kitchens, a medic tent, media production zones, and cultural events were all part and parcel of the space. Yet in other respects it was totally different from Occupy.

There were no general assemblies or decision-making processes apart from those organized by the constituents of the camp in their smaller affinity or

organizational groups. The central podium was an ongoing open-mic where people were free to speak as they pleased and some larger concerts and film screenings took place.

Despite the absence of a centralized decision-making body, the camp was home to many different organizations in addition to the individuals and groups of friends who were also there. The occupation resembled an open-air fair of Left, revolutionary, and identity-based groups. Each group eventually carved out a little space where members would camp and congregate.

This was especially the case while the square itself was occupied. Almost every far-left group opened up a tent with their flags flying on top. At one end of the square looms the Atatürk Cultural Center, which was adorned with dozens of banners representing many of the same groups camped out in the square and the park. What a slap in the face this must have been for Erdoğan, who had unleashed police violence for years every May Day to prevent rallies of a few hours. This surreal landscape was refreshing in that it showed a rare moment of unity among groups that evolved through sectarian split after split, stretching back to Turkey's militant-leftist 1970s. It was also tragic that the pissing contest between organizations promoting their names and logos continued even in these circumstances.

The Gezi occupation also differed from Occupy in class composition. While in the US, many of the occupations became de facto homeless encampments, this was not the case in Istanbul. Perhaps because the occupation broke out at the end of the school year, during the day the occupiers were mainly people in their 20s—a budding white-collar workforce slated for the malls and business plazas of AKP's future. This changed at the end of each workday when thousands of older people passed through until the late hours of the evening.

Critiques have been leveled at the Gezi Resistance for being too nationalistic in tone and while this might have been partly true at the onset of the uprising it was quickly transformed thanks in

most part to the support of Kurdish political forces. To the left of the entrance was the space claimed by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the political party of the Kurdish struggle. Kurdish youth raised the flag of the PKK and portraits of their leader Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned in a Turkish island prison since 1999. For those who remembered the bloody '90s, when the majority of the 35,000 deaths from the civil war occurred, it was surreal to see the face of public enemy number one flying on flags over Taksim square. Up until recently, politicians would not even dare speak Öcalan's name publically, instead choosing to refer to him as the "head of the terrorists."

Every night, the commune transformed into a massive party and celebration. Huge circular halay dances with hundreds of Kurds singing their songs of liberation occurred at the entrance; deeper inside the park, participants consumed copious amounts of alcohol. This public drunkenness expressed defiance of the AKP and its policies of piety, but it also generated controversy, as some from the encampment wanted a more serious and less intoxicated resistance and others thought it inappropriate to be partying while comrades were still fighting the police in Ankara and elsewhere in Turkey, and even other Istanbul neighborhoods such as Gazi.

During the taking of the square and the weeks that followed, the air was thick with the excitement of a city in resistance. Indeed, "resistance" became the assumed name for what was going on; those on the streets saw themselves as part of a resistance movement against the AKP, its vision for Turkey, and its police state. This resistance was expressed in the creative energy, wit, and humor unleashed upon the walls of Istanbul. The liberated zone was visually transformed, thanks in part to street vendors who seamlessly switched to selling spray paint in addition to helmets and gas masks instead of their usual fare of sunglasses, clothes, and tourist shwag.

Wall space ran out; you had to wander around searching for a place to throw up your most recent witty slogan. Istanbul jam-packed the streets with

obscure references to popular culture, internet memes, and nose-thumbing at the government. Word plays transformed the ubiquitous teargas into encouragement, asking, "Does it come in strawberry?" Erdoğan's statements were flung back at him, such as when he said each woman should bear three children: "I'm gonna make three kids and have them jump you." Another hilarious quip waited around every corner: "Tayyip Winter is Coming," "We're gonna destroy the government and build a mall in its place," "Incredible Halk," "You weren't gonna ban that last beer," "Everyday I'm Chapuling," and on and on for kilometers.

The takeover was so complete that even some of the non-sympathetic business establishments had to comply or suffer mob justice. One of the owners of a döner kebab stand at the entrance of İstiklal Avenue off of Taksim Square made the mistake of posting on Facebook about "the dogs" who had taken over and his desire to live in a Muslim country. His restaurant was reduced to rubble moments after and the board of his company had to fire him. Other businesses that did not demonstrate solidarity with the resistance were repeatedly pressured and taunted. Even Starbucks Turkey had to issue a press statement expressing that it was with the resistance and would always provide support, after they received some heat for not assisting protestors.

The fact that many from the bourgeoisie supported the uprising points to the central contradiction that the movement carried within it. Members of the old-guard secular and liberal bourgeoisie appeared to support the Gezi Movement—most notably the Koç Group, one of the few family brand-name dynasties in Turkey. They went as far as providing infrastructural support by opening up their franchise of the Hyatt alongside the park to serve as a makeshift hospital. Mobile telephone providers brought cell phone transmission vans behind the barricades in order to facilitate the ever-increasing traffic of text messages and tweets. Ironically, they had to hang banners reading "This



vehicle is here so that you have reception” as a sort of insurance against arson.

How could the interests of a faction of the bourgeoisie converge with those wanting to stop development in Istanbul? This was a product of an intra-ruling class conflict that had been brewing for years between green (Islamic) capital, under Erdoğan’s favoritism and facilitation, and the old-guard secular capitalist class that had been sidelined and saw the Gezi uprising as an opportunity. It also reflected their desire to be part of a movement to preserve the individual freedoms and rights of modernity, recently under attack by the Islam-tinted neo-liberalism of the AKP. The fact that a part of the ruling class of Turkey supported the Gezi movement points to its success at becoming all encompassing and also its failure to become an anti-capitalist force, despite the overwhelming number of anti-capitalists involved.

All of this transpired behind dozens of barricades set up around the liberated zone of Taksim and the park. On one of the main avenues leading into the square, İnönü Avenue, there were 15 separate barricades constructed from bricks, construction debris, busses, cars, rebar cemented down to point outwards, trash containers, and everything else. Constructed from materials passed hand-to-hand by human chains of fifty or more people, these barricades stood many meters high.

As in other cities where barricades have stood consistently, such as in Oaxaca during summer 2006, where they were maintained for months, the barricades developed their own rebel culture. Crews of mostly younger kids or leftist militant youth claimed barricades for their own with a sense of pride and conviction. Little tents and squatted spaces storing rocks and bottles near certain barricades also provided shelter for their guardians to rest. These were the outliers, the barricades at the edge of the commune. The more central ones had been claimed by the leftist pissing contest with their banners and flags.

## Clearing the Square

*I am woken up by a comrade who tells me that the police are in the square. I rush to get there. I run across the barricade of the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP) at the edge of the square, a few hundred meters from their offices. It’s a massive metal structure made of scaffoldings, concrete barriers, and other material scavenged from construction sites. Molotov cocktails are being tossed by a handful of people in front of the barricade, but behind a shield that reads “SDP Public Order Enforcement.” From the higher vantage point of the park, hundreds of people are watching this unfold as if at a soccer match, cheering when a Molotov explodes on the advancing water cannon and booing when the cannon attempts to ram through the barricade. A few hours later, the media posts pictures of those tossing the firebombs and the twitter feeds light up with conspiracy theories about how they are actually police provocateurs. The evidence? A bulging object beneath one of their belts—supposedly a radio or firearm.*

*This assumption takes hold like wildfire; in no time even the international media is circulating it. Those at the barricade eventually have to retreat into the SDP office, and 70 people are arrested in a raid. Among them is Ulaş Bayraktaroğlu, identified in pictures clearly as one of the main people throwing the Molotovs: he’s a former political prisoner from the state-invented Revolutionary Headquarters case, and a member of the central committee of the SDP. The police also show a handgun they say was found in the offices with other weapons. The conspiracy theorists update their stories. Despite their determination to remain in denial, the pacifists involved in the Gezi Resistance are confronted with the fact that this movement also includes bona fide leftist militants, some who are also part of armed factions. So much for the spin doctors and liberal intellectuals who are framing Gezi as Turkey’s version of Occupy, who hurry to label those who fight back as provocateurs.*

*All day and into the night there is intense street fighting in and around the square, while inside Gezi Park a strange tranquility reigns. The calm is occasionally interrupted by medics rushing the injured from the streets into the medical area. From time to time, the police launch*

a barrage of tear gas into the park; some put on their gas masks so they can continue their conversations, while others rush to extinguish the canisters. In the end, the square is left to the police. All in all, it feels like another normal day at Gezi.

## Enclaves of Militancy

One evening, I go to the neighborhood of Gazi, a stronghold of DHKP-C (*The Revolutionary People's Liberation Party – Front*) and other leftist urban guerrillas. The DHKP-C has come to resemble a death cult of martyrdom in their use of suicide bombers. Despite their undeniable ability to assassinate police, in their communiqué of support for the Gezi Resistance they said that they would not launch any attacks until absolutely necessary, as they want to see the street-fighting movement mature without such interventions. Hats off to them.

The fighting never stopped in the neighborhood of Gazi even when the reclaimed Gezi Park resembled a massive party behind barricades. Although only 19 kilometers away, Gazi is much further in class terms from the more white-collar resistance in Gezi, with its own history and culture of resistance. A slum dating to the '60s, it was the destination of many refugees from the Kurdish civil war, and it has always been a strong enclave of the leftist Alevi population of Istanbul.

In 1995, a paramilitary drive-by attack on two cafés and a bakery left an elderly man dead before the attackers fled to the local police station. It was a provocation in the true sense, not the kind alleged by pacifists at Gezi. After the vehicle rushed to the police station, neighbors immediately gathered in front of it, only to be fired upon with high-caliber machine guns. Another person died on the spot and many others were wounded.

Gazi exploded. For four days, it was in open revolt, with battles against the police and the army. In the end, seventeen people were killed and the rebellion was brutally crushed, but it left a deep mark.

Some Greek comrades who go to Gazi looking for that Aegean solidarity in the flame of a bottle say that they have never seen such large Molotovs. Indeed, every evening a march starts up on the main street and becomes an urban

war with fireworks, stones, slingshots, and Molotovs directed against the police and their armored vehicles, met by teargas and a plethora of explosives and projectiles. People from the neighborhood tell me that at times both sides have also fired upon each other, but no one has caught a bullet yet.

At Gezi Park, the Gazi neighborhood has become a mythical land where superhero leftists wage war on the pigs. It's distant enough to be an Other inspiring admiration. This reminds me of how US liberals love it when the third world riots against corrupt governments, yet line up in front of the police to protect them from angry youth in their own cities. The sentiment in Turkey is not as bad as in the US though—how could it be? When the police attack Gezi, people fantasize about Gazi coming to the rescue. As usual, Twitter is the venue for rumors: “Gazi neighborhood is on the highway marching to Taksim!” “The police are totally fucked now that Gazi is coming,” but the superheroes never arrive en masse.

That is, not until the last attack on the park on Saturday June 15. That day, thousands of residents from Gazi walked on the highway at night and fought their way to Taksim, finally reaching the city center by morning. They joined in with those attempting to take back the square; but even with their help, in the end we could not recapture the square for a second time.

## Counter-Insurgency

Tension reigned after the police took Taksim square on June 11. Everybody was waiting for the inevitable final battle for the park. It was clear that the police had taken the square in order to prepare a staging ground from which to take back Gezi. Walking around the encampment, there was a palpable sense of urgency. Some were collecting the most valuable things that needed to be rescued in case of a raid; others were getting ready by filling balloons with a panoply of fire accelerants. The counter-insurgency of the state had reached a high point: Erdoğan and his cronies kept emphasizing that naïve young environmentalists were becoming pawns in the hands of leftist terrorists, and that those who were behind all of this unrest were actually the

“interest lobby” or “foreign agents.”

The government used outright lies to rile up its base against the Gezi Resistance. The day after the park was reclaimed for the commune, on June 1, the heaviest fighting occurred in Beşiktaş, as the soccer fan club Carşı tried to make its way up the hill to reach Taksim. They fought for hours in their own neighborhood, in one instance hijacking a massive bulldozer to charge the police lines. When it seemed like the police were on the verge of committing a massacre, hundreds of people fled into a nearby mosque seeking shelter. The muezzin, who sings the call for prayer, let people into the mosque and facilitated the formation of a makeshift clinic. Blood was oozing from multiple head injuries and many were vomiting from the tear gas.

This episode was brought up over and over again by the AKP and Erdoğan himself to illustrate the sinful nature of the resistance. They had entered a mosque with their shoes! They were drinking beer and having orgies! People running for their lives had entered the mosque with their shoes on, but all that transpired inside was a frantic effort to stitch people up. Such lies were refuted even by the officials of the mosque itself and served only to infuriate those who were involved in the protests.

Erdoğan's strategy was to polarize the country by painting the Gezi Resistance with such defamation. He was counting on his 50% electoral victory and emphasized their democratic ascension after having been suppressed by the Turkish military apparatus for many years. Erdoğan became such a defender of democracy in fact that when he was at his mildest he would encourage the resistance movement to meet him at the polls in the upcoming elections. The possibility that those reclaiming Gezi and Taksim Square could have been done with both the military, as brutal guardians of a secular democracy, and with democracy itself, having brought autocratic neo-islamism was and still is beyond the comprehension of those in power in Turkey. Where the experiment in autonomous self-organization will lead the rebels of Turkey is still up for discussion but the

circumstances in which the struggle emerged does point to a critical engagement with democracy.

The counter-insurgency playbook was practiced page by page; the AKP met with self-appointed representatives of the movement in order to seek concessions and to prepare the pretext of failed negotiations. The commune rejected such representation outright, holding autonomous forums at seven different areas of the park to discuss how to move forward. These discussions never resolved themselves, since the park was cleared while they were still in their initial stages.

Although there were no “naïve environmentalists” to be found at Gezi, there was a degree of naïve trust that the negotiations with the government could provide a solution and delay the impending attack. Consequently, the final attack came when people least expected it. On June 15, when the park was filled with its usual evening crowd of children and the elderly, the police attacked. They entered Gezi Park, destroying everything and brutally beating everyone in their way. The city exploded once again, as neighborhoods started to make their way towards Taksim to participate in a battle that would last for more than a day.

## Fighting for the Commune

*There was something odd about the water cannon that evening, during the eviction of Gezi Park. Instead of spraying at the fiercest members of the resistance at the front, the nozzle was directed to spray over everyone. There was no tear gas launched at that moment, yet the air was acidic, burning in our lungs. The murmurings began around us: were they using transparent tear gas? Was it some new crowd control weapon?*

*It became clear what was happening when we saw people running into sympathetic bars, furiously stripping off their clothes soaked by the water cannon to reveal that their whole bodies were bright red. Some were convulsing, trying desperately to rub anti-acid solutions all over their skin. The next morning, the newspapers published photos of the pigs loading jugs of pepper-spray into the water*

cannons. The initial attack with pepper spray towards the woman in the red dress had produced one of the iconic images of the resistance, which had spread through social media. With no sense of irony, the police were now dousing the entire population in pepper spray from the nozzle of the water cannon.

The barricade wars went on until the first hours of the morning. After a few hours of sleep, we were back facing the tear gas and ripping up cobblestones on Siraselviler, one of the streets that lead to Taksim. It was the usual back and forth as we advanced toward the water cannons, only to be sprayed back to our original position behind the barricades. It was Father's day; some people had hung a banner for our patriarch sultan, reading "Happy Father's Day, Dear Tayyip."

Finally, the police overcame our barricades and there was panic as they charged down the street arresting people. I had the keys to a nearby apartment, so I gathered a group of fugitives who seemed helpless and lost and let them in. Eleven people around their mid-20s flooded into the apartment with relief. Peeking out the window, we saw a manhunt on the streets, plainclothes police sweeping up anyone they found. The fugitives hadn't forgotten their manners; they clumsily took off their shoes at the door even though I insisted that it didn't matter under the circumstances. I was reminded of Erdoğan turning crowds against the infidels who didn't take off their shoes when they went to have their orgy at the mosque.

It was a bit awkward, as none of us really knew each other; there seemed to be three or four different groups in the tiny apartment. Everyone was riled up and speaking frantically about the events of the day and the weeks past. Suddenly, I realized that some of them were nationalists, and others were upset about people throwing rocks at the police. This was the spirit of the Gezi Resistance some spoke of, finding yourself in the same space with people you never thought you had anything in common with. I was tempted to argue with them, but after all the teargas I didn't have it in me. Later I lamented that missed opportunity.

After the police left, we went back out into the street. It was 9 pm; just like every other night over the past three weeks, people were leaning out of their windows banging on pots and pans. Cars were honking; some residents started

chants from their windows as the pot banging subsided: "Shoulder to shoulder against fascism!" "No liberation alone, either all together or none of us."

Night had fallen. We began gathering on Istiklal Avenue in order to find each other. Once we were a few thousand, we started marching toward the square, with the conviction that it belonged to us. The police attacked with tear gas and water cannons. How many times can you experience the same sequence of events and still find joy in the face of it? A group of young and fearless street fighters headed to the front with one of those boxes of fireworks meant to be placed on the ground and watched from a safe distance. They lit it up and held it aimed at the closest water cannon, advancing slowly as bright colors exploded on the line of cops. The crowd behind them applauded wildly as we advanced to reinforce the growing barricade before setting it on fire.

The battle continued into the early morning hours until there were not enough of us left in the street. We returned home wondering what would happen the next day, what will happen to Turkey in the future.

## **This is Only the Beginning**

Once the police cleared the park, they continued by raiding the homes and offices of the best-known participants. The first raids were predictable: the state went to the addresses of leftist militants and groups, as it had for decades. Dozens of operations took place and many of their cadres were arrested. In addition, there were also raids against the leaders of Carşı, the soccer fan club of Beşiktaş, and against those who tweeted what was happening in the streets under their legal names.

The euphoria of the Gezi resistance hasn't evaporated yet. The stories are on everyone's lips; people talk about in the cafés and bars of Istiklal. This year's Pride Week, at the end of June, was themed resistance. Both the Trans March and the main Pride March were bigger than they had ever been: 50,000 people adorned in rainbows in the face of a traditionally homophobic Turkish society. Friends commented that this was probably the second time



that there were more straight than gay people in the Gay Pride march—the first being thirteen years ago, when there were only a few dozen people, most of them allies marching in solidarity.

At the onset of the rebellion, there were instances when anti-women, anti-sex worker, and homophobic chants could be heard in the streets. Queers and feminists intervened in various ways when this took place; they succeeded in smashing this manifestation of patriarchy in a way that transformed people.

The story goes that during the first days of the uprising, after the police were kicked out of Taksim and the square was reclaimed for the people and barricaded, there was a moment of calm. A delegation of Carşı members took advantage of this to pay a visit to the offices of one of the main LGBT organizations in Turkey. Just like other rebel identities and leftist groups, this organization also had an office in the liberated zone of Beyoğlu, and were providing crucial infrastructural support to the uprising. Carşı entered to offer an apology for their homophobic and sexist chants after having been warned in the streets. They explained that this was what they had been taught by society, but now they understood their mistake. As a token of their apology, they had brought a riot police shield.

After the dust settled, I met up with a friend I'd made during the heady days of the commune, a student from Kurdistan going to Istanbul Technical University for an engineering degree. We talked about the peace process the AKP had been crafting with the PKK since the winter. He was extremely cynical about the politicking, seeing the Gezi Resistance as the true path to peace for the Kurdish struggle. We exchanged stories we'd heard about personal transformation during our time in the streets. He told me about the hostility between their BDP tent with flags of Öcalan and some of the Turkish nationalist elements in the Gezi occupation. The argument quickly became a dialogue that continued, interspersed with battles with the police, throughout the events. Suddenly

finding themselves on the receiving end of state violence and a media blackout, many Turks had to come to grips with the fact that their perceptions of the war in Kurdistan were mediated by the same corporations that were silencing them. Sharing this space of resistance to a common enemy inspired a revolutionary reconciliation.

Yet with summer lethargy taking over, the first iteration of the Gezi Spirit came to an end. June had left five dead and hundreds with serious injuries, some in critical condition. Physical and figurative wounds needed healing. Although from afar, it might seem that things have died down since June, on the ground there is a tense anticipation of what is to come. One challenge for the resistance will be the upcoming election cycles: municipal elections in spring 2014, and general elections a year later. All shapes and sizes of political leeches are looking to coopt the movement.

It is incredible how the sense of nausea, helplessness and depression that had overtaken many feeling the steamroller of the AKP go over them has evaporated after Gezi. Where the Gezi Resistance will find itself in the future and whether or not it will be able to further its practice developed behind the barricades is still an open question. Although one cannot predict the course of the coming years in Turkey it is unquestionable that a genie has come out of the bottle and millions have found each other. For now, this spirit is haunting Turkey and the worst nightmares of those in power since everyone is aware that Gezi will have an everlasting impact on social and political life in Turkey. The Gezi Resistance is posed for the long haul as it reminds each other in one of its most popular chants: This is only the beginning, Continue the struggle!



*The view of the fifth barricade from the fourth one*

During the first ten days of June, 15 separate barricades were present on İnönü Avenue, one of the central arteries leading up to Taksim Square.

# Crisis, City and Democracy

*Notes on the Uprising in Turkey*

The June revolt in Turkey was marked by the heterogeneity of its participants, united by their common contempt for the country's authoritarian prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The uprising spread like wildfire across the country and brought together many different sectors of society who felt sidelined, belittled and trampled upon by his autocratic rule. Although lost in its international reverberations the initial struggle that gave birth to the uprising was much more than saving a park and definitely much more than trees. It arose from an economic model emphasizing development that acted as a response to a financial crisis knocking at the door. Through its evolution the rebellion created a rebel geography that captivated the imagination of those who were a part of it.

Different from the recent riots and wild demonstrations in European countries, the uprising in Turkey was not sparked by extreme austerity measures. In fact, having been through heavy neoliberal austerity programs of structural

adjustment at the end of the 20th century Turkey can also be seen as a post-austerity nation. Neither was it similar to the popular revolts of the Arab Spring which removed multi-decade dictatorships from power resulting in electoral systems. But similar to its place on the world map, the uprising in Turkey contained elements from both, as it also gave its own flavor to these new currents of popular resistance.

## On Crisis

Although the uprising in Turkey is not immediately linked to austerity it is still deeply related to the financial crisis of 2008. Initially the crisis did hit Turkey but the strategy of the government was to contain it by massive privatization of land for real estate projects and urban renewal, and through this redefining Istanbul as an AKP constructed modern metropolis. The massive increase in large-scale construction projects was tied to an equally large increase in foreign debt. Capital influx was also bolstered since Turkey became a much more lucrative market for speculators after the FED slashed its interest rate following the 2008 collapse. This situation has resulted in Turkey currently having about \$340 billion in external debt (43% of its national income, 2/3 held by the private industry). This liquid capital strengthened the Turkish Lira against the dollar while financing Erdogan's multiple urban renewal and development projects.

Privatization and debt is engrained into the Turkish economy and have been its hallmarks since the 80s and 90s when Turkey was one of the primary targets of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies. But today is distinct from that period and from current IMF imposed austerity regimes such as in Greece. What we are experiencing in Turkey are debt incurring measures to keep the crisis at bay and implemented as an economic growth strategy. Turkey has attracted foreign capital due to its balanced national budget since this wards off any

fear of extreme inflation. Its budget is balanced in roughly the following way: as opposed to austerity implementing countries national expenses are being kept mostly constant but with a shifting emphasis towards infrastructural spending for development projects that benefit the bourgeoisie, especially those in construction and related sectors. National revenue is produced via privatization (the enclosure of land for the aforementioned development projects), indirect regressive taxes (which also have a conservative character such as increased sales tax for alcohol) and foreign debt. This debt is paid off (notably that held by the private sector) by borrowing even more money (readily available thanks to the high growth rate) leading to the large sums owed today, a significant portion of which is earmarked to be paid off the spring of 2014. Debt is incurred in order to keep the budget afloat and provides a corollary for enclosure (privatization) rather than the state being forced to privatize in order to receive or renegotiate loans (debt) as it was during the period marked by the IMF.

What distinguishes the current neoliberal regime of the AKP from its predecessors is its emphasis on the city and its transformation of Istanbul into a full fledged metropolis through the privatization of public land. One of the primary strategies for urban transformation has come through giving exceptional powers for land enclosure in 2003 to the Turkish Housing Development Administration (TOKI), which is tied to the office of the prime minister. The revamped TOKI took the lead in privatizing public space for the purposes of gentrifying neighborhoods such as Sulukule or Tarlabası which had been seen as proletarian eyesores with marginalized identities such as Kurds, transsexuals and Roma people occupying some of the prime real-estate zones of Istanbul. TOKI is now being subsumed under the Orwellian Ministry of the Environment and the City, lead by the former head of TOKI, and has taken over many of the powers once possessed by local municipalities.



This land grab and resulting (rent/unearned) income is via massive development projects such as a third bridge across the strait of Bosphorus, an ecologically devastating preposterous new canal through Istanbul connecting the Black sea to the Marmara Sea and a new tunnel below the strait. These are in addition to the privatization of historic ports such as the Haliçport and Galataport projects and train stations such as Haydarpaşa, with the intention of converting them into high-end condominiums (“residences”), malls or other centers of commerce. Certain central zones in Istanbul now have four separate malls one beside the other and dotted amongst skyscrapers, all built within the past few years. The enclosure and privatization of public space is accompanied with militarization to quell any dissent as evidenced today by the police state surrounding the Kadıköy ferry terminal in Beşiktaş, slated for privatization in the service of an adjacent luxury hotel. Upon completion, these gated monuments to capitalism are policed by private security guards.

The unrest across Turkey led to sharp drops in the Istanbul Stock Exchange as the financial forecasts became grim. Remarkably, Erdoğan snubbed his nose at these developments as he continued to blame the “interest lobby” (a populist move with anti-semitic undertones in order to cultivate his base since interest is seen as a sin for Islam) and “foreign powers” for the tumult in the streets. His cabinet outright dismissed European Union calls for less police violence. Picking fights with the liberal secular bourgeoisie (what we can assume he means by “interest lobby”) or debt-holding European nations does not bode well for the future of the Turkish economy. On the heels of the economic volatility precipitated by the popular uprising came the end of low to zero interest rates (quantitative easing) by the FED. These two factors in concert will no doubt lead to foreign capital flight and in fact the lucrative Turkish economy has already started to exhibit a downward trend.

## On the City

Any shrewd politician would have been able to manage this revolt without fanning the flames the way Erdoğan did. His obsession over transforming Taksim Square is a sign of anxiety and arrogance due to political weakness and points to his almost feral desire to leave a neo-Ottoman stamp on the city. The hyper-gentrification and commercialization of İstiklal, a pedestrian avenue that emerges from Taksim Square and is the backbone of the neighborhood of Beyoğlu, and the religious conservative attacks on the street life of bars and cafes in that area are part and parcel of the AKP’s desire to transform the city into a modern yet conservative Islamic Disneyland. Despite this assault, throughout the years Beyoğlu, and the youthful political culture it is home to has resisted the AKP’s vision for the future.

Many of the city’s protest marches emerge from one end of İstiklal and end at the other, unless they are met with a police attack somewhere in between. A multitude of leftist, feminist, queer, minority, counter-cultural groups and radical magazines have their offices in the same area. The Saturday Mothers who are a group of mostly Kurdish mothers of disappeared or murdered political activists have been holding a vigil on İstiklal every Saturday since 1995 to demand that those responsible for their children’s lives are brought to justice. Taksim Square is also the hotly contested site of Mayday celebrations. These are only some of the numerous influences that have shaped the culture of the neighborhood that became ground zero in the June uprising.

Despite the vibrancy of clubs, bars and cafes in the area there is also an accompanying barrenness that comes from it being an extreme commercial district and shopping zone with a slew of the world’s brands having outlets on İstiklal Avenue. Perhaps anticipating the possible eruption of social discontent, the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul (also belonging to the AKP) repaved the whole of İstiklal Avenue about five years ago. Once a street lined with paving stones, İstiklal now has large

concrete slabs that have reliefs to give the appearance of cobblestones, a similar esthetic with none of the utility.

The psychogeography shifts on the streets that branch off of İstiklal and there is a multiplicity of independent bars, cafes, bookstores, restaurants and other small businesses. And there are still some cobblestones. These side streets are one of the primary hangout spots for the youth of Istanbul. That many of those confronting the police were in a zone where they had already spent a considerable amount of time and are familiar with was a great advantage. The terrain of the urban revolt was on the side of those resisting.

Many of the street fights would follow a similar pattern. People amassed on İstiklal Avenue would advance up to the police lines holding the entrance to Taksim Square until faced with an overwhelming amount of teargas and water cannons. Instead of scattering the crowd would retreat calmly and build large barricades on the avenue. When the police advanced through the barricades, people would take the parallel side streets and then emerge on İstiklal once again, either further down or behind the police lines. This would continue on the same way until the early morning hours. Not only did many of the street fighters already know the geography quite well but also there was a large amount of sympathy, if not straight up camaraderie, from the owners and workers of the various establishments around İstiklal. As if fish swimming in the sea, people would dip into any given bar or restaurant and hide until the police had moved by or the teargas cleared only to reemerge and converge once again on İstiklal to face the police. It should be noted; however, that after the days of heavy conflict some of this supportive sentiment from businesses has waned, especially with the police encouraging those of them who support the AKP and promising to turn a blind eye to attacks on protestors.

The battles which were won in the streets were much more victories of will and perseverance than of violence. A perseverance that was grounded in

the will to resist the enclosure of commons and take back space. The taking of the square on the 1st of June was not done by pushing the police back with a barrage of rocks but was a result of the determination of the massive amount of people who spontaneously emerged to shock everyone. The joke was not only the police, but also those resisting them who had suddenly found each other like never before. Unlike appointments given for street conflicts, such as May Day where each side prepares their forces and the odds of wining are extremely low, spontaneous eruptions such as the 31<sup>st</sup> of May and the 1st of June are when people are the strongest. After two days of non-stop fighting, the police had to retreat from the square and Gezi Park, leaving it to thousands who moved in and started to construct elaborate barricades up and down all the streets leading to the zone.

Despite being the epicenter, Taksim was by no means the only place where revolt was breaking out in Istanbul, let alone in the whole of Turkey, where there were demonstrations in every major city. Especially in the capital Ankara, fighting persisted long after things had taken a lull in other cities. In Istanbul, for almost three weeks whole districts were in open revolt against the police and the AKP. As already well publicized, in some more well off neighborhoods such as Beyoğlu, Beşiktaş, Cihangir, Şişli, Kadıköy, but also in poorer neighborhoods with a radical left presence, such as Sarıgazi, Kurtuluş, Gazi, Okmeydanı and Maltepe, the amount of solidarity was unprecedented. People would leave their apartment doors open late into the night so that those still fighting on the street could run away from the police and lock it behind them. Furniture and large appliances were thrown from windows to reinforce barricades as were water reservoirs from rooftops. Windowsills were lined with lemons, milk and water against the teargas. In main streets, where fighting would go on for hours, elderly people would come out to bring food for those in the street. When the police would finally clear a street, residents would come out to their windows and start yelling and

swearing at them to get out of the neighborhood. This would be met with another barrage of teargas canisters, sometimes directly into the houses for the sheer purpose of silencing the neighborhood.

It is difficult to describe the muscle memory that developed in those three weeks which were interspersed with anticipation of police operations and heavy fighting that would last for days. Leaving your house without the obligatory helmet, goggles and gas mask was more of a faux pas than leaving your cell phone or wallet behind. The taunting of the police in chants imbued with melodies and spirit reminiscent of soccer stadiums gave the crowds a collective form of life that felt invincible. When teargas fell, the first reaction was never to panic or run away, but to cheer the arrival of the tear gas. The resistance learned early on that extinguishing the canisters as opposed to throwing them back was much more effective and large jugs of water were brought from homes and stationed permanently in neighborhoods waiting for the inevitable to arrive. Building barricades and advancing them towards police lines was done without thought and it became second nature to pass bricks hand-to-hand in human chains dozens of people long. Maybe the Istanbul Revolt did lack a coherence to be a veritable insurrection, but it was definitely an insurgency as pertaining to the development of tactics by whole sections and swaths of the city as its partisans.

## On Democracy

During the revolt, the signs and banners of people would often call Erdoğan a “dictator” and emphasize that they were fighting for “democracy.” Clearly Erdoğan is not a dictator in the sense of Mubarak, Ben Ali or the PRI of Mexico and has been elected fair and square by democratic elections with a near 50% of the vote. There are certain characteristics of the electoral system, most notably a 10% election threshold, that some in the Gezi Resistance hope to reform. But beyond that, when the protestors ask for democracy they are not actually asking for more opportunities to vote but

for certain “rights” or freedoms such as the freedom of expression, assembly, a free press and freedom to conduct their personal lives without infringement from the state. The fact that a democratically elected government has become so authoritarian and has trampled upon “democratic” rights presents an opportunity to critique the democratic system.

The tension between the two interpretations of democracy, as an electoral system vs. as inalienable rights, have become even more acute due to the particular Turkish context of an elected neo-Islamist government attempting to transform a society with a secular legacy. Erdoğan has further exasperated the situation by threatening to unleash his voter base by saying that he is “having trouble keeping the 50% at home.” On the 16th of June, in Istanbul, Erdoğan organized the second of a series of “Respect the National Will” rallies that would occur during the following weeks. Having ordered the eviction of Gezi Park he came to Istanbul as a triumphant conqueror and spoke to a massive crowd of hundreds of thousands. He talked of how they had indeed democratized Turkey and that if people wanted to oust him the only legitimate way was the ballot box.

There is no overlooking the fact that the prime minister is able to mobilize huge crowds for his rallies. The AKP enjoys an incredibly subservient media, a well-oiled political machine which amongst other public services controls transportation (routinely offering free transport for its rallies while canceling services for rival events) and is incredibly well organized within a patriarchal and nepotistic party structure. It is possible that the resistance might not win a headcount in the squares, but this is why the experience of the commune created in Gezi Park and the street battles which surrounded it are a testament to the limitations of the bourgeois democratic system, despite some of the participants’ insistence that it is a fight for democracy. Looking at content and experience rather than quantity and votes gives us a clue for a way out of the democratic stranglehold. Mutual aid, solidarity and direct action, all of which have been the hallmarks of the Gezi Resistance are

in fact the antithesis to the democratic system run by elections and regulated by representatives. In fact, the Gezi Resistance was profoundly anti-democratic in the sense that it barricaded itself against the guardians of bourgeois democratic relations, the police. In another sense it was incredibly more democratic as people who were not agents of the state could come and go freely as they pleased, in stark contrast to the closure and militarization of the park by the democratically elected AKP for weeks after the police seized it on June 15. The two conceptions of democracy, as elections and as rights, are posed for a profound severance.

The fickleness of Erdoğan's democracy has truly come to light, especially concerning the peace process with the PKK, put into motion since March. Maybe due to closing ranks in the aftermath of Gezi, or out of reprisal since important Kurdish figures including PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan himself expressed support for the uprising, but most likely because of already existing insincerity towards the process, Erdoğan is not holding his side of the bargain with the PKK. This is despite a great number of Kurdish guerrillas already having left the battlefield by crossing out of Turkish borders. Erdoğan has recently reneged on constitutional reforms to include the Kurdish identity and language and there are ongoing construction projects for dozens of new military police outposts in Northern Kurdistan (within the borders of Turkey). On June 28, soldiers opened fire on a demonstration in Lice to protest the construction of one of these outposts killing one and critically injuring many others. Northern Kurdistan has had to endure such violence for decades but this particular attack might have been a turning point for the Kurdish struggle for freedom and autonomy. Having endured police violence in the preceding weeks those who were part of the Gezi Resistance, who are mostly concentrated in the western and non-Kurdish zones of the country, immediately staged huge solidarity demonstrations against this attack in the Kurdish territory. Before Gezi, it would have been unimaginable for such expressions of solidarity

to spontaneously erupt from a non-Kurdish segment of society. As opposed to a vacuous democratic peace process people had enacted revolutionary solidarity.

Those who have been evicted from Gezi Park are attempting to recreate its spirit in popular assemblies that have mushroomed around Istanbul and in other cities. The proliferation of these public forums has lead some to claim that it is an experience in direct democracy. Regardless of what one might call them, they are a refreshing form of political being for those who have lost hope in a democratic system. It is still unclear what shape these forums might take, but at their onset and during the largest participation they've had, they forego any sort of decision making structure that would pretend to speak and act on behalf of the whole assembly. Apart from some exceptions, by and large the crowds did not seem to opt for a crippling consensus system or neither for a majority vote negating the agency of minority opinions. Instead proposals would be made from the stage and if there seemed to be enough interest, action would be taken. Sometimes this would be in the form of a spontaneous march and sometimes in the form of a working group.

## **The Horizon**

Financial crisis pushes democratic governments (in terms of elections) to become undemocratic (in terms of rights) and in Turkey this has been felt more acute due to the conservative nature of the government managing the crisis. The twist and innovation of the rebellion was that it did not emerge as against the classic austerity response to crisis, but against development and enclosure based on a prosperous, albeit temporary, period. This twist was also observed in the visceral rage that marked Erdoğan's speeches, as he couldn't seem to comprehend the ingratitude of the people he rules, especially while one neighboring country is in the grips of a civil war and the other in a deep economic crisis. Prosperity and massive construction projects have not created a subservient population and when the delayed crisis eventually hits Turkey those



affected might have more in mind than to return to the good old days of liquid capital.

Many activists had been fighting the different manifestations of Erdogan's neoliberal city long before Gezi and this was a struggle stretching back almost a decade. Neither they nor anyone else predicted the contagious revolt that would spark from a battle against developing a park, what had seemed to be just another losing fight amongst many. Those defending the city commons converged with almost the whole spectrum of social movements and were fueled by a visceral hatred of the police and a patriarchal prime minister. It became clear that revolts happen for psychic reasons as well as for material ones. Forecasters of social revolts (i.e. orthodox Marxists) should learn this and many other lessons from June 2013 in Turkey. In fact, forecasting is both impossible and counter-productive and it is best to be prepared for social explosions rather than attempt to predict them. Those of us who are part of anti-authoritarian and anti-state currents must always be ready to push revolts, such as Istanbul, to their farthest limits and beyond. In moments like these, which promise to be more frequent around the globe, whoever is most organized is able to transmit their ideas and tactics in the most effective manner and become more potent within the rebellion.

A further lesson concerns the idealized revolutionary worker. Those who see the worker as the primary revolutionary agent must begin (as if they have not had sufficient reasons to do so already) to shift their gaze away from labor unions. Even the most leftist labor confederations in Turkey, such as DISK and KESK, were impotent in propelling the movement into the realm of the economy. Although this is not completely a fault of their own and also has to do with the historical decimation of organized labor by the state in Turkey, it was also clear that beyond the classical factory or industrial worker, the formally unorganized, precarious, white-collar and diploma holding proletariat on the brink of unemployment have the potential to take many initiatives in social revolts. Furthermore the traditional blue collar proletariat might hold more

revolutionary potential outside of their workplaces under the dominion of their unions. A crucial turning point for similar rebellions will come through the arrival of the antagonism from the squares and parks into the arena of commerce and work where this unorganized proletariat either already works, or is kept docile with its promise.

Turkey is not the only country where democracy, which is supposed to produce social peace and prosperity has had its alarm bells ringing. An even more dramatic example is Egypt where only a year after the democratic election of Morsi the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square came back in order to continue where they had left off. So much for the pundits who were quick to label the Egyptian January 25th movement as one purely against the dictatorship of Mubarak. Although the real movement of the people has once again been stalled by the Egyptian military one can predict that this will not be the end of the spirit of Tahrir. Looking from Istanbul and considering that both the military drafted constitution of Egypt and the Freedom and Justice Party of the Muslim Brotherhood are modeled upon Turkish examples, it appears that there is a growing number of people who desire to do away with both.

The rebel geographies of the world are becoming less and less content with the poor choice between a democracy or a dictatorship and social explosions challenging the roots of the liberal democratic paradigm are sure to continue. In the meantime the anti-capitalist and anti-state revolutionaries of the world must not be idle. Getting organized and staying active so that our valuable muscle memory does not atrophy is crucial. Updating our age-old praxis to consider these emerging new contexts and coming up with a fresh and appealing formulation of a post-capitalist world based on contemporary social, ecological and economic realities is also just as important. Ultimately what will make us the most effective within these revolts is to produce in action the new sets of social relations that will expand our sequestered horizons.

for copies of this pamphlet  
or other inquiries  
write to:  
[beginning@riseup.net](mailto:beginning@riseup.net)



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