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Introduction

Umut Özkırımlı

No one could have predicted that a peaceful sit-in held by a handful of environmental activists on 28 May 2013 to counter government plans to raze Istanbul’s Gezi Park in order to make room for the construction of a replica of the 19th-century Ottoman Artillery Barracks would escalate into a country-wide protest movement – arguably the most serious political crisis Turkey, a country often hailed as a “model” in the region, has faced in the past ten years. Triggered by violent police crackdown and precipitated by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s defiant and polarizing rhetoric, the demonstrations quickly spread to other cities (there had been more than 200 protests in 67 cities across the country by 3 June, according to the then Interior Minister Muammer Güler; see also “Timeline of Gezi Protests” at the end of the book), turning Gezi into a hub of diverse grievances, mostly directed at what was widely perceived as the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) growing “authoritarian” tendencies.

To be sure, the Turkish authorities have not been particularly adept at accommodating the protesters’ demands or allaying fears of creeping authoritarianism. Prime Minister Erdoğan chose to dismiss the demonstrators as “thugs” (çapulcu) bent on tarnishing the country’s international reputation, or worse, toppling the government. In this grand scheme, even Twitter, the main platform the protesters used to communicate with one another, became a “menace” to society, alongside a vaguely defined “interest lobby” and their internal collaborators. It was thus not surprising that Erdoğan ordered the riot police to step in on the 18th day of the protests, who did so by raiding the park with tear gas, water cannons and plastic bullets, crashing into businesses and hotels which sheltered the demonstrators, even attacking the medics who were treating the injured. Overall, the protests left 5 dead (6 counting Ahmet Atakan who died in clashes between the police and anti-government demonstrators in Hatay on 10 September 2013), more than 8,000 wounded and a deeply polarized country behind.

Much ink has been spilled since June 2013 to explain the Gezi protests in the media, both domestic and international, most of it based on hasty analogies and banal platitudes, speaking of a “Turkish Spring” or portraying the events as the latest manifestation of the global occupy movement. Yet no academic analyses of the protests have been published so far. It is in this context that we see this book as both timely and important. We believe there is an urgent need for an intervention that attempts to offer a sober and critical reflection on the “eighteen days that shook the model”,
identifying the key problems Turkey will be grappling with in the near future and exploring the conceptual and methodological responses to challenges that are raised by them.

The aim of this collection, then, is to offer a preliminary analysis of Gezi protests, based on participant observations, informal interviews with protesters and, in some cases, active participation in the events as they were/are unfolding. Some of the more general questions that are addressed in this context are: How can we account for the protests – their timing and the particular form they assumed? Who were the protesters, and what were the motivations of different actors who took part in the demonstrations? Why did the AKP government choose to suppress the protests instead of meeting the demands of or reaching a compromise with the protesters? What was the logic behind the polarizing rhetoric of Prime Minister Erdoğan? How did issues of gender, sexuality, body politics and space play out in the protests? What could be the possible implications of Gezi protests for progressive politics in Turkey? Were they in any way connected to protest movements in other parts of the world?

It is important to stress at the outset that we do not, in fact cannot, purport to offer a well-rounded analysis of the specific factors or the more general dynamics that have generated these protests as it is still too early to fully grasp the nature of the events, let alone predict their potential socio-political implications. Our aim here is less ambitious in scope albeit, in our view, no less pertinent, all the more so as protest has assumed a variety of novel forms and, though sporadic, demonstrations continue in several cities – as do police violence and government intrusiveness. In that sense, this book should be seen as a modest attempt to make sense of the ongoing struggle to name/define and give specific direction and purpose to the protests.

This also sits well with the general thread that runs through all the contributions to this volume – the belief that Gezi provided a unique moment when different grievances and concerns converged, providing the raw material for what might be called, in social movement parlance, “injustice frames” which propelled a not insignificant part of the population to embark on collective action. This way of thinking about the protests, it needs to be underlined, does not imply the development of uniform and coherent cognitive definitions, or a concrete oppositional identity. Contradictory themes, definitions and understandings can and do coexist within the same experiential framework and context of
continuous interaction and negotiation that makes possible, sustains and reproduces social action systems. In this sense, what has been commonly referred to as the “Gezi spirit” constitutes “work in progress”, an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals and groups that is continually negotiated, tested, modified and reconfirmed. Needless to say, none of the contributions to this volume adopt an approach that focuses solely on the creativity of groups and individuals, turning a blind eye to the various structural and institutional constraints on collective action. Indeed, self-identification depends on social recognition, as the demarcation of the self (a collective actor) must be recognized by others who are defined as such through this very process. This was conspicuously missing in Gezi, as the “Gezi spirit” was rejected out of hand by a significant portion of Turkish society, notably the governing party and its supporters. Still, even this rejection has been creatively utilized by the protest movement through its adoption and rehabilitation of the derogatory term çapulcu. This term that was initially intended to deny purpose, agency and identity to the protest has been appropriated by the protesters in such a way that it became a positive, if vague, flag which the latter readily wrapped themselves with.

The legacy of Gezi is far from certain. It remains to be seen if a new durable form of politics and citizenship will emerge out of this rather unique moment in recent Turkish history. Still, one thing is certain. The seed has been sown and a generation that had been taught to shy away from politics has been caught up in the maelstrom of political contention and has gained/reclaimed its voice.

Outline

The book kicks off with a chapter by Soli Özel which situates the Gezi events in a broader, more global, context and offers insights into the societal dynamics that might have led to these protests, setting the stage for the discussion that follows. “What was put into practice with these demonstrations was Turkey’s search for a new definition of citizenship”, Özel argues, as well as “an attempt to enlarge the liberal–democratic space in Turkish politics”.

Aslı Iğsız concurs, claiming that Gezi protests have crystallized larger dynamics in Turkey, which include recent legal changes and their contributions to the institutionalization of neoliberalism, centralization of
powers, allegations of cronyism and authoritarianism, thereby offering us a valuable opportunity to reconsider how high-security neoliberal nation-states operate in general. It is easy to overlook that “there is a complex transnational system behind neoliberal policies that feeds authoritarianism”, she maintains, pointing to the gradual process whereby the riot police have replaced the military in “liberal–democratic” societies, assuming the task of domestic guardianship of capitalist interests.

Cihan Tuğal problematizes the attempts to solve the political crisis that followed the protests by sidelining Prime Minister Erdoğan and shifting the balance of religious forces in the country through an analysis of the discourses of the globally influential Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen. The Gülenization of the regime is a deceptive middle road, he contends, showing us how Gülen “dehumanized” the protesters and stressed the need for a “common reason” that could safeguard national unity. For Tuğal, the Gülen movement is a core producer of Turkish-Islamic “democratic authoritarianism”, hence incapable of addressing the issues the Gezi revolt has raised.

Onur Bakıner discusses what has been referred to as the “spirit of Gezi”, which brought together people from a broad political spectrum, many with no prior history of activism. Taking the question “what kept such a diverse crowd together for weeks” as a point of departure, Bakıner explores the potential political and social outcomes of the Gezi protests, laying special emphasis on the role of the transformation of social values and interactions hitherto marked by cultural and emotional gaps.

Michael Ferguson turns the spotlight on the class dimension of Erdoğan's politics of polarization, in particular his use of the popular distinction between “White Turks” and “Black Turks”. Through a brief yet compelling analysis of the ambiguous history of the term “zenci” (black, negro) and the enslaved and emancipated Africans in the Ottoman Empire, Ferguson exposes the pitfalls of Erdoğan's strategy which ended up antagonizing not only the so-called White Turks, but actually Black Turks by aligning them with an innate lack of education and culture.

Zeynep Gambetti probes into “the politics of the body” that has come to the fore with the protests, the kinesis of thousands of bodies which displaced strategy and deliberation and turned Gezi into some sort of “empty signifier” under which diverse grievances could be subsumed. The resistance thus took the form of a struggle of “disorderly bodies, of those who did not have any dispositif other than their bodies”. What happened throughout June 2013 was novel, Gambetti concludes, as it
cannot be explained by conventional political categories. One needs to look into “the extensive interstices” of the politics of the body to begin deciphering it.

Emrah Yıldız places the LGBTQ individuals and their collective action at and beyond Gezi at the center of his analysis, redefining them as political subjects of their own right, with a view to shedding light on the connections between sexuality and solidarity. Focusing in particular on the intricate alignment of Kurdish and queer politics in contemporary Turkey, Yıldız highlights the emancipatory potential of Gezi Park’s “expressive and explosive political momentum” and its contribution to the ways in which queer politics could be imagined and practiced anew.

Drawing on the insights of the field of political ecology, Ömür Harmanşah suggests that the Gezi protests represent “the sudden but perhaps expected eruption of an urban grassroots movement for the defense of urban historical heritage or the collectively used city spaces” that were deeply imbued with social memory and a sense of belonging. Tracing the links between Erdoğan’s recent urban development projects and the Ottoman nostalgia which has often been said to characterize AKP rule, he shows us how the protests signify a fatal blow to Erdoğan’s utopian vision, articulating with other ecologically conscious grassroots movements around the world.

The volume concludes with Spyros A. Sofos’s brief sketch of the dynamics that Gezi protests have expressed and the ways in which they constitute a significant departure from both the conceptualization and practice of politics in contemporary Turkey, through an interrogation of the politics of space that has occupied center stage in the protests.

Note

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