

## **Public space democracy\***

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We are witnessing a new type of worldwide protest. From the Arab world to the western capitals, from Turkey to Brazil, a wave of protest movements, in spite of the differences among them, all reveal a social malaise, a gap between society and the political agenda—and solicit new approaches to established concepts of democracy.

Tahrir Square in Egypt, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the *indignados* in European cities, Gezi Park in Istanbul and the protest movements in Brazil: they have all generated new democratic imaginaries. And the protesters have continued to sustain their public presence, favour non-violence and civic resistance, invent new forms of public

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agency and use visual arts and performativity, as well as raise new issues relating to faith, the environment and capitalism.

The West has ceased to be the sole source of democratic inspiration. Societies in the Islamic world struggle to find new ways of articulating faith and pluralism, and reject the vicious circle between secular authoritarianism and political Islam. They compare their distinct experiences of integrating Islam into democracy and learn from each other's success or failure. Meanwhile, protesters in the western world turn their gaze toward the Arab world and emerging countries elsewhere as sources of social inspiration. A mimetic reversal occurs between the West and the East. To the extent that the West is not the only standard bearer of democracy, interconnected imaginaries and transversal solidarities between different societies emerge. As Jeffrey Alexander rightly points out, "there is an unprecedented connection of Eastern and Western impulses, demonstrating that the tide of democratic thought and action is hardly confined to Judeo-Christian civilizations."<sup>1</sup> He argues that the social upheavals in both the West and the East should be read within the same "narrative arc." Thus, according to Alexander, Barack Obama's presidential campaign, the Egyptian uprising in Tahrir Square and the Occupy Wall Street movement can all be considered "utopian civil society movements."

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1. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The arc of civil liberation: Obama-Tahrir-Occupy", paper presented at the Reset-Dialogues Istanbul Seminars 2012 ("The Promises of Democracy in Troubled Times"), which took place at Istanbul Bilgi University, 19-24 May 2012.

The democratic imaginaries that are released and staged as a result of these protest movements circulate globally among citizens of different language communities and are not confined within the boundaries of national politics. However, although they do illustrate the importance of global civil society and new political ideals, I do not think that we can qualify them as either “utopian” or “civil society movements.” They are not utopian to the extent that these movements formulate claims “here and now.” They are present-oriented, that is, related to everyday life politics, and not future-oriented as in the case of revolutionary leftist movements. “Utopia” (literally “no place,” from the Greek *ou*, meaning “not” and *topos*, meaning “place”) refers to an ideal that is not yet realized in a given place. Whereas, these movements are grounded in material places. They are named according to the places occupied—Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Wall Street—, where protesters make their presence felt, oppose decisions imposed from above and stage their protests. These places—public squares, parks, streets—provide a stage on which different actors display their ideals and perform and rehearse collectively. In contrast to which, civil society movements are organized around common interests, issues or identities. The protesters attending the new protest movements might be members of such civil society movements—such as the feminist, green, gay, religious, leftist or trade-union movements—but they are present in the public square, park or street as individuals, as people, not as representatives of their particular movement(s). They

demonstrate personally, stage their “personal” malaise, in public and become part of a collective protest movement. It is the public space that enables the gathering of people with different social origins and divergent cultural orientations. The public space movements connect the personal and the public and differ from organized civil society movements or identity movements.

222 The contemporary protest movements express the feeling that “enough is enough,” thus drawing a clear line between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. These movements have their origins in unexpected events and sometimes seemingly trivial issues. In each case, there is a tipping point, a single event that triggers collective protest. Yet we cannot explain these movements as an outburst of the masses, an upheaval of the unprivileged, a display of anger on the part of the oppressed. The participants converge around claims for pluralism, dignity and justice. These new protest movements are different from the organized political movements of the past and they lack a core ideology. They are also different from the identity movements of the 1980s, such as feminism or Islamism, yet they generate a sense of cohesion, a collective force that enables them to mobilize civic resistance. They defy political authoritarianism and reject neo-capitalism. They unsettle the divide between the East and the West, but also between the religious and the secular. They open up a new space, a public space for democratic imaginaries, bringing the micropolitics of everyday life into the realm of democracy.

### **An anatomy of the Taksim Gezi Park movement**

The Taksim Gezi Park movement provides us with empirical keys for exploring new forms of public agency. It has staged a new repertoire of public action and, in so doing, illustrated the creativity of micro-practices and the impact that the politics of everyday life can have. As a public square movement it opened up a new sphere of experience and generated new democratic imaginaries that grew out of and resonated with Istanbul. The Turkish experience illustrates the convergence between the West and the East, between Europe, the Arab world and emerging countries such as Brazil.

The destruction of Gezi Park and its trees for the implementation of an urban development project triggered the occupation of Gezi Park on 28 May 2013. When the police intervened brutally against the occupiers, using disproportionate force and wounding many, the Gezi Park movement gained new momentum through the massive support of the middle classes and the spread of protest from Istanbul to other cities in Turkey. People have not hesitated to take to the streets, block avenues and occupy their cities' central spaces and public squares. Others participated from their balconies, with whole families joining in with the protesters' chorus and banging on pots and pans. They have found pacifistic means of protest that require no arms or political slogans to express their discontent and frustrations with the AKP government. This civic resistance has not weakened for more than twenty days, even in the face of brutal displays of force by police who used tear gas without hesitation.

This urban movement, initiated by young people, supported by the middle classes and featuring a strong female presence, set new standards for democracy in Turkey.

The Gezi Park movement marked a watershed, there is “before” and “after” Gezi Park. The movement gave a platform to voices not heard in the media and to actors and social groups that lacked representation during elections, creating new alliances and overcoming old cleavages.

### **Similarities and differences as regards other protest movements**

224 The Gezi Park movement has been compared to other social protest movements. The similarities with the “Mai 68” youth protest movement have been mentioned. The “Tahrir square” movement in Egypt and the “Arab Spring” came to mind. But also the movements in the capitals of Western cities, such as “Occupy Wall Street” and those of the *indignados* were given as examples that helped to understand the anti-capitalist nature of the Gezi Park protest movement.

While it does share features with all of the above, the Gezi Park movement is not the same as any of them. As in the case of the ‘68 movements in France, it distinguishes itself as a youth movement. However, this time round, the youth culture did not turn against the previous generation. On the contrary, parents followed in the footsteps of their children to participate in the Gezi Park movement. There again, in Paris, the ‘68 slogan “*ça suffit*,” “enough is enough,” was addressed to De Gaulle, who had been in pow-

er for ten years. Similarly, the Gezi Park protests have said “enough is enough” to the AKP, which has also been in power for the last ten years, and to its leader, Tayyip Erdogan.

For those who take the Arab Spring as a model, these protests resemble the occupation of Tahrir Square and demonstrate the population’s anger aimed at an authoritarian regime. However, the political structures are different. Turkey has had a parliamentary system with free elections since 1946. The Arab Spring, symbolized by the first occupation of Tahrir Square, was about the dissolution of authoritarian regimes and expressed the demand of the majority to have a voice, via democratic elections. The protests in Turkey are about defending minority voices that have been disregarded in the context of a majoritarian concept of electoral democracy.

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For others, the Gezi Park movement is similar to European activists protesting against global economic forces. The Turkish debate displays similar elements, but also more specific ones. While European activists such as the indignados (the “outraged,” defending their dignity against neoliberalism) were reacting to threats posed by economic instability, the Turkish protesters were not the victims of financial crisis. However, they do object to the elite urban development projects undertaken by the AKP government. In respect of which they are similar to Brazilian protesters who also profited from a decade of rapid economic growth and, nevertheless, still expressed a malaise in the face of the upcoming 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Rio Olympics.

The significance of these worldwide protest movements is shaped according to their original context. Defending a few trees in Istanbul's Gezi Park is not merely a pretext for political contestation. The plan to construct a shopping mall on this public park was a tipping point and has led to the manifestation of a new critical consciousness. The Gezi Park movement expresses the objections to the kind of urban development and real estate speculation that characterized the Turkish economy during the past decade.

226 In the Gezi Park movement, environmental sensitivities and the critique of global capitalism intertwined. In general, capitalism tends to manifest itself through abstract forces, like globalization, financial markets and neoliberalism—and escapes the grip of politics. In Turkey however, capitalism as materially incarnated in the shopping mall is a new and concrete symbol of global financial capitalism. But not only is the shopping mall a material manifestation of commercial capitalism, consumer society and the global exploitation of labour. Indeed, the initial enthusiasm for the malls as spaces in which to hang out as well as shopping centres faded away as they started to ruin the urban fabric in the name of commercial greed and consumerism. For the inhabitants of Istanbul, the project of constructing a shopping mall in the middle of Gezi Park meant private capital's confiscation of a public space, of a park open to all.

The development of the Turkish economy under the AKP government has been widely acknowledged. However, this success story has also been subject to critique,



including among Muslims. A Muslim youth movement calling itself “Anti-capitalist Muslims” had already articulated its criticisms of “pious capitalism” and hyper-development prior to the Gezi Park movement, which it has since joined. Thus the movement gathers momentum and expresses a new urban awareness of the pitfalls of consumer culture.

The Gezi Park movement seeks to defend public space against commercialization and the transformation of urban life into a mere generator of rents. The park stands for the public sphere. The protection of the park is not merely metaphorical. The park signifies the physicality of the public sphere. It is the concrete, open space in which citizens can give voice to their opinions and gather together.

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### **The shrinking public sphere**

The reaction of the government with tear gas and police violence constituted the obstruction of the public space by state power. The participation of ordinary citizens, the middle classes and housewives with children expressed the desire of the general public to protect the public sphere and stop it shrinking and suffocating any further.

Restrictions on freedom of expression, the crackdown on the opposition and the firing of journalists who refused to comply with tight editorial controls have led to the muzzling of public discourse. The fact that the Gezi Park protests were not covered during the first few, crucial days by the mainstream media, which instead broadcasted a doc-

umentary on penguins among other trivial programmes, was ample proof of this. The media became a target for the protesters who did not hesitate to adopt the penguins as a symbol of their performative and humoristic actions, many being dressed as penguins.

228 Secondly, the latest regulations to restrict sales of alcohol and ban all related images, advertisements and movie scenes brought together students, merchants and, in particular, actors, singers and directors who feared restrictions on their individual and artistic freedoms. The decree controlling the sale of alcohol has ignited a huge reaction, particularly due to the moralist rhetoric surrounding it. The suspicion that public life is increasingly being regulated according to Islamic values prompted mobilization to defend threatened ways of life.

Concerns over the invasion of personal space and secular ways of life had been expressed by “anxious moderns” from day one, at times verging on Islamophobia. The “Demonstrations for the Republic” (*Cumhuriyet Mitingleri*) of 2007 had already voiced this fear of interference, although they were tainted by hints of sympathy for military intervention. Even so, they were the preliminary signs of the secular middle classes’ loss of power in Turkey, and marked the separation of secularism from state power.

The current movement, on the other hand, does not embody the exclusionary nature of secularism under the guarantee of state power. Secular values are ingrained in the protesters’ lifestyles but, in contrast to their par-

ents, the younger generation do not express intolerance towards Muslims. The Gezi Park movement represents pluralism and has managed to reassemble people in a square, around a tree and against the polarizing rhetoric and politics of the government. Both young and old, students and bureaucrats, feminists and housewives, Islamists and leftists, Kurds and Alawites, people with disparate ideas and lifestyles, even the supporters of rival football clubs Beşiktaş and Fenerbahçe, who would not normally be seen together, were united.

Thirdly, the Gezi Park movement brought public civility and mutual respect as a public virtue to the fore. Tayyip Erdoğan's style and mode of address have profoundly offended public opinion. He has laid into his opponents by referring to them as "marginal," "thugs," "scum" (*çapulcu*), or even "drunkards" (*ayyaş*). His remarks, initially commended for their sincerity, occasionally humorous, turned into offensive, patronizing, scornful and insulting rhetoric. Erdoğan's contemptuous vocabulary has prompted collective indignation, as did the scandal he provoked by naming a new bridge over the Bosphorus Yavuz Sultan Selim, a name that evokes the massacres of the Alevis.

Thus, "Respect" has become a new slogan tagged on walls all over the cities, expressing the need for reintroducing civility into Turkish public life. The Gezi Park protests themselves remind us of the importance of public manners and civility in public life. It seems almost paradoxical for a young and libertarian movement to be re-

claiming concepts like respect and civility, formerly regarded as the watchwords of conservatives. However, this movement displays a new public culture that is respectful of the other and careful in its usage of public rhetoric.

### **Staging public agency**

230 The Gezi Park movement illustrates the importance of physical space for rethinking power relations between ordinary citizens and political and economic authorities. The debates over the ownership and alternative uses of the park drew attention to different layers of history and provoked memory issues in addition to the controversy over the shopping mall. For the latter was to be housed in a reconstruction of the Ottoman barracks that had existed on the site previously. The cosmopolitan past of the city, and the Pera district in particular, was evoked by Turkish-Jewish intellectuals relating their childhood memories of the park.<sup>2</sup> Urban historians recalled the existence of an Armenian cemetery in the same area, dating from the sixteenth century. The space is neither flat nor neutral. It contains different temporalities, different historical strata: it is culturally thick. Thus, today's politics of space converges with politics of memory, with Turkey's multireligious and multicultural past. The question that arises is: whose place, whose memory becomes part of the political agenda?

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2. Esther Benbassa, "Erdoğan ne touche pas a mon jardin", *Huffington Post*, 3 June 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/esther-benbassa/manifestations-turquie-erdogan\\_b\\_3376797.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/esther-benbassa/manifestations-turquie-erdogan_b_3376797.html).

Gezi Park provides a stage for interaction and performativity. In contrast to traditional political movements, the park is open to improvisation, creativity and humour. Thus, these protesters have experienced a kind of communal life with music, environmentalism, politics, flowers and beer, at times reminiscent of Woodstock or the communal life of the '68 counter-cultural movements.

They have also shared their improvised, performed, alternative, peaceful square culture via social media with the rest of the world, Facebook and Twitter being the new global networks of our time.

The movement has created its own language and repertoire of action. *Ayyaş* (drunkard) and *çapulcu* (scum) have acquired new meanings. Individual protesters borrowed these names to present themselves as “*ayyaş*” and “*çapulcu*” and hence have inverted these hurtful, stigmatizing, offensive words into humoristic assertions. *Çapulcu* stands now for the common identity of the movement. Global public figures expressed their solidarity with the #Resistanbul movement—Noam Chomsky’s picture with the subtitle “I am also a *çapulcu*,” is widely tagged and circulated in social media.

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The picture of a young girl, wearing a red cotton summer dress, standing still while being heavily tear gassed by police became an icon of the Gezi Park movement. It encapsulated in a visual image, in a snapshot, the fragility and the determination of youth and, moreover, the passive and powerful resistance of a non-militant, ordinary female youth. The image was replicated as a cartoon

on posters and shared on social media. Graphic designers reinterpreted the photograph in which the girl appears much bigger than the policeman. They warn against the heavy use of police oppression: “The more you teargas, the bigger we get” is written on the poster.<sup>3</sup>

Following the evacuation of Gezi Park, a single man standing in the midst of Taksim Square without moving for eight hours on 17 June inspired a new type of civil disobedience in Turkey and precipitated a nationwide, silent struggle.<sup>4</sup> The young “standing man” was a performing artist who has also protested against the headscarf ban in Turkish universities by covering himself as a woman in his class.

**232** The Gezi Park movement continued to gather together different segments of society through the enactment of new forms of public agency. Public garden forums and fast-breaking meals in the streets illustrate well the collective soul of the movement. Residents continued to assemble in neighbourhood public gardens, organize “forums” and invent new rules for public discussion. To avoid causing noise nuisance, instead of applauding, they favoured non-verbal communication and used a new grammar of hand signs to express their approval or disagreement with the speaker. During the first days of Ramadan, a “public fast-breaking meal” (*iftar*) gathered together pious and secu-

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3. Rob Williams, “Turkey protests: ‘Woman in red’ Ceyda Sungur becomes reluctant symbol of Turkish resistance”, *Independent*, 5 June, 2013.

4. “‘Standing man’ inspires a new type of civil disobedience in Turkey”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 July 2013.

lar people alike. These meals, called “mother earth meals” (*yeryüzü sofrası*) and organized upon the initiative of “Anti-capitalist Muslims,” became very popular. In contradistinction to the luxurious “iftar” tables set in five-star hotels, people brought their own meal and shared their food with others at these “earth iftar tables,” set on the street. The one that took place near Gezi Park in Beyoğlu, on İstiklal Street, was 650 meters long. These public street meals created an atmosphere of communion between the “cool” youth of Turkey and the “pious,” and made the politics based upon the polarization the secular and the religious seem obsolete.

### **Public agency and political power**

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Many observers have alluded to the limited capacity of such actions to translate into political opposition. However, one should distinguish the “public” aspects of these movements from the “political” ones, and not underestimate the transformative effect of the former in the political sphere. The protesters are not organized into a political force, they are on the stage for a brief moment, they offer a “snapshot,” but this moment is now etched in the collective memory and engraved on the square. It is wrong to view this movement solely through a political lens. This is a public protest movement. And it can rejuvenate social imaginaries and regenerate the fabric of democracy as long as it remains autonomous of politics and protects its innocence under the canopy of the trees. The movement may lose its democratic soul if it puts on a po-

litical garment and pursues a political agenda. Its political significance and effectiveness is rooted in its public performativity.

The call for “respect” for citizens and the call for the “resignation” of the ruler represent two slogans, each with their own logic as far as possible actions are concerned. Although they feed each other and both empower the protesters, we should not confuse an uprising for dignity with an effort to overthrow a democratically elected government. The movement’s originality resides in its occupation of the public square, not to be confounded with a mass movement that defies the rules of democracy.

**234** The Gezi Park movement focussed our attention on the public space as a site for enhancing and staging democracy through the everyday practices of ordinary citizens. It has revealed the public sphere as a vital sphere of democracy that should be open to all, not obstructed by state authorities or handed over to capitalist ventures.

For the AKP government in Turkey in particular, but for political rulers generally too, it is not the public sphere but public order that matters. Their aim is not to give in to a bunch of marginal and fringe extremists. Their method of rule, legislation and over-enthusiastic disciplining of citizens all reflect a reluctance to leave public spaces to citizens. They seem to prefer ballot box democracy to public square democracy.

Struggles for democracy may be expressed via elections, reforms, or demonstrations, each of which takes place in different temporalities. The retreat of the army from the pub-



lic domain, the initiation of the Kurdish peace process and the discussion of the taboo subject of the Armenian genocide are responses to long-term problems and all promise to contribute to the democratization of Turkey. Compared to these fundamental and deeply rooted issues of Turkish democracy, the Gezi Park movement might be dismissed as “minor” politics, a struggle by people for day-to-day issues, aiming to preserve their privileges. Some even blame the Gezi Park movement for hindering and harming the peace process that has just been initiated between the AKP government and the Kurdish nationalist movement. Others are reluctant to pursue peace, adamant that peace will only consolidate the position of AKP government and not bring about true democracy. Be this as it may, the Gezi Park civil resistance movement has already expanded beyond the limits of our democracy. And, as Sırrı Sürreya Önder, a supporter of the peace movement and Member of Parliament for Istanbul (Peace and Democracy Party, BDP) stated, it is inconceivable that the Gezi Park movement could harm the peace process: the real threat to the process would come from oppression.

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The Gezi Park movement shows that we are at a new threshold in terms of democracy, such that Istanbul and Diyarbakır<sup>5</sup> are not that far from each other. At the heart of this movement is the restoration of public space in democracies. These spaces are public in that they are open to all, and bring together men and women, Muslims and the non-religious, Alevis and Kurds, young and old, middle and

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5. The unofficial capital of the Kurdish movement.

lower classes. This has allowed a new critical imaginary to circulate, one which focuses on protecting physical public space, along with its capacity for bringing people together in a convivial way. In the face of state oppression through commerce and morality, citizens have put culture before consumption and respect for diversity before contempt for others. When the taboo subject of the Armenian Genocide is confronted, when it becomes possible to make peace with Kurdish nationalists and when the army has withdrawn from public life, this movement will have helped meet the need for a new public culture based on recognition and bringing people together. The future of Turkish democracy resides in the credo of this movement, which asks that those

**236** in power hold their tongues, abstain from moral intrusions and ban violence. Rejecting the politics of polarization and stigmatization, the Gezi Park movement is reuniting people across ancient divides. While it is predominantly a secular movement, it is not secular in a repressive way. The square presents an opportunity and space for congregation, debate, support and reassembling. The square becomes the stage where actors improvise and perform. In the square they create libraries, organize workshops or distribute “kandil simidi” (a religious holiday bagel). They rehearse together new forms of citizenship.

The soul of this libertarian and unifying movement is best summed up by Nazim Hikmet’s poem: “Live like a tree alone and free, live like brothers like the trees of a forest.” Public space and the new forms of agency practiced there provide democracy with a new momentum—the pub-

lic communication and collective staging of personal agency lead to the circulation of social imaginaries through global rehearsal.

### **Avenues for reflection**

To recapitulate, new public forms of protest hint at several avenues via which to reflect upon democracy. In the global era, the public sphere is not limited to a single national language community. Rather than the discursive and regulatory or normative aspects of the public sphere, the antagonistic and the experimental dimensions of the public sphere need stressing. The performative and visual repertoire of action staged in a given physical locality opens the way for new forms of public agency and brings the cultural-artistic realm to the fore. Just as Jürgen Habermas did in his works, we need to revisit the relations between the public sphere and democracy and question the autonomous and interdependent aspects of both.

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The second avenue for rethinking democracy is linked to the secular. For the protest movements in both Istanbul and in the Arab world eluded the power of the secular and unsettled the divide between it and the religious, preparing the way for new convergences between the Islamic and the western world.

The third avenue of reflection is related to concepts of minority and majority rights. We need to go beyond considering minority rights as if they were pre-established entities that coincided with certain religious and ethnic groups. The experimental nature of the public sphere can

furnish “active minorities” with the freedom to refashion their identities and ways of life. The social engineering of public order and public regulation through legislation becomes a hindrance for the participatory public sphere.

The uses of hate discourse and violence in public life remain a major concern for democracies. Multicultural societies bring into closer proximity different cultural codes foreign to each other without providing a framework for translation and communication. “Stranger sociability,”<sup>6</sup> the main characteristic of public life as conceptualized by Michael Warner, all too easily gives way to a politics of hate and intolerance, that is, to Islamophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and the like, which is then exploited by the emerging nationalist and neo-populist movements. The public virtues of common life, polite modes of address, civility and respect become paramount for rethinking pluralism in contemporary democracies.

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6. Cf. Michael Warner, *Publics and counterpublics*, Zone Books, 2002.