



REPORT  
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# Killing the Lernaean Hydra: the core, crust and promise of Occupy Gezi

The eruption of the Gezi events was unexpected and shocking for all Turkey's political actors. The AK Party government's self-confidence had been at a peak after more than a decade's unprecedented political power, and local resistance to its policy of neo-liberal urban transformation had remained near-invisible in the mainstream media.

Nonetheless, it was this resistance that constituted the core of Occupy Gezi, triggering a chain of countrywide protests against the government

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İstanbul is an ideal city for study of the government's neo-liberal urban transformation policy. This report addresses the Gezi uprisings that began in the city, beginning with an exploration of the government's concrete policies through the concepts of folio-cities, anti-cities and non-spaces. The author then investigates the dynamics that led to the transformation of an ordinary local and isolated resistance to the destruction of Gezi Park into an extraordinary countrywide protest. By relying on in-depth interviews with protestors, the heterogeneous political structure of "Occupy Gezi" is analyzed, laying bare the political motivations, demands and positions of the crust of the protests. Finally, it is concluded that solidarity, respect and empathy -- the main values that defined Gezi Park during the occupation and its successor, the "Park Assemblies" -- may represent to the defeat of the Lernaean Hydra of power, whose reproducing of heads symbolizes the spontaneous transformation of oppressed (mazlum) into tyrant (zalim) when power is held and secured.

**The core: resistance to neo-liberal urban transformation**

Among the major debates in Turkey over the Kurdish question, political Islam, or the Syrian crisis, the increasingly popularizing resistance toward neo-liberal urban transformation -- one of the most consistent policies of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government -- went more or less unnoticed in the media. Despite this, these policies have seen a major transformation of urban space in line with neo-liberal logic, nowhere more typically or extensively than in İstanbul. Such urban transformation had already begun with the global rise of the neo-liberal political economy back in the 1980s, since when even cities' local governing bodies, which are supposed to provide public services, have been pursuing the profit-loss logic of the market. As a result of state policy promoting the phenomenon known as urban entrepreneurship, the use-value of cities has been disfavored for the sake of their exchange-value.<sup>1</sup> The AK Party government has accelerated this process by repressing emerging resistance to neo-liberal urban renewal policies, relying on its political strength and popular mandate.

Neo-liberal urban transformation can be defined as the acquisition of profit and power through the transformation and the regulation of the urban space via



cooperation between capital and government. There are at least two major concrete projections of this radical neo-liberal transformation that are becoming clearly visible in the case of İstanbul. The first projection is the division of the city as a hyperspace into subspaces of class and identity, disconnected from each other by sharp lines. The second is the emergence of plazas, business centers and shopping malls from every corner of the city, turning it eventually into a non-space (non-lieu).<sup>2</sup>

In the first example, just like the Garden City in Oman, the Dream City in Arbil and New Cairo and New Luxor in Egypt,<sup>3</sup> the gated communities characterized by a closed perimeter of walls and fences, strictly controlled entrances and various shared amenities, separate their residents from the rest of the city by providing self-contained, immured and securitized life spaces. The aim is to guarantee the free political, economic and cultural consumption of middle classes by isolating them in folio spaces where urban poverty is invisible. The folio-cities of "İstanbul residences" or "Ottoman mansions" constitute a global sector, finding their countrywide expression in Dubai, and in fact market artificial lifestyles by turning cities into consumption spaces for fast lifestyles.<sup>4</sup>

The middle classes caged in gated communities who embrace the city as its true residents ("white Turks")

refer to the urban poor with pejorative terms -- çingene (gypsy), kıro (lout), köylü (peasant), apaçi (yahoo),<sup>5</sup> etc. -- designating their neighborhoods as anti-cities, and excluding them from the city centers. Several neighborhoods, such as Ayazma, Sulukule and Tarlabası, which hosted the urban poor for years in the heart of İstanbul, are being destroyed as part of urban renewal policy. Their residents are being subjected to a forced emigration to the edges of the city, the aim being to make urban poverty invisible.

The second projection is the creation of non-space: This refers to the artificial, pre-designed relationship between the space and the human, and to the transformation of city residents into machines of production and consumption without any sense of belonging to their cities. Indeed, according to research from 2001, some 44.7 percent of the population of İstanbul did not feel themselves to be from the city, while 11.4 percent of residents did not even want to be so.<sup>6</sup> This is a striking indication of the magnitude of alienation from and the loss of belonging to the city culture.

In fact opposition to specific projects of neo-liberal urban transformation did emerge. However, a lack of media interest in this resistance was coupled with its generally unorganized, local, isolated and disconnected nature. The recent wave of resistance to the destruction

This image of academic Ceyda Sungur being pepper-sprayed by a policeman as she walked through Gezi Park became an instant icon of the protests.

May 28, 2013  
PHOTO: REUTERS,  
OSMAN ORSAL





of symbolic (İnci patisserie) and historic (Emek Cinema) public spaces, by intellectuals, architects, students and artists from the middle classes also remained a local and isolated issue in Beyoğlu, unable to connect itself to the general resentment of neo-liberal urban transformation.

Coming to Gezi Park: Everybody was expecting the same result, including the few dozen protestors aiming to save the park from becoming a mall. When the police attacked the demonstrators with pepper spray and batons, however, the unexpected occurred: Thousands flocked to the park in solidarity. Thus, this little demonstration for “a bunch of trees” rapidly became a countrywide anti-government protest.

**The crust: resistance to democratically elected authoritarianism**

When the police was obliged to leave the Taksim Square in early June, the author and a colleague conducted in-depth interviews with 200 protestors in

pejorative language of the prime minister -- who directed the terms *çapulcu* (marauder), *marjinal* (marginal) and *ayyas* (drunk) against the protestors. It can thus be inferred that had the police not intervened in the initial peaceful protests in such a brutal manner, and had the prime minister used more inclusive and appeasing language in the first place, Gezi Park would not have become the trigger for an occupation of Taksim Square and a subsequent countrywide protest.

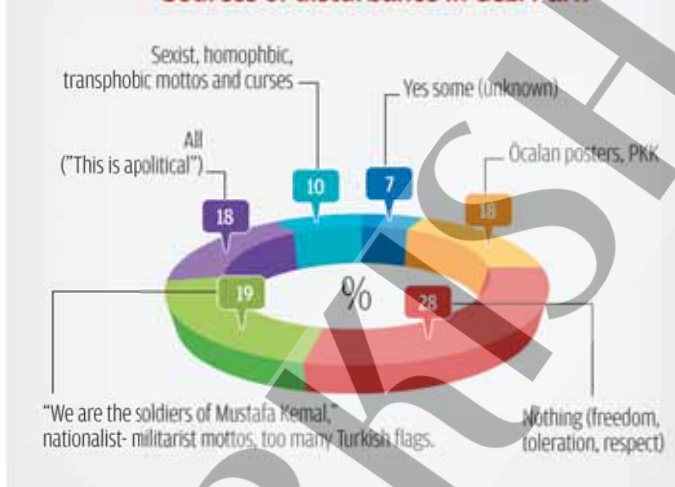
Apart from the government's conspiracy theories that simply show its unwillingness to take responsibility for the protests, let alone perform a self-critique, many authors and academics have argued that the main actors in Occupy Gezi were motivated by reactionary ideology rather than environmental concerns. This argument mainly relies on the government-sponsored distinction between the core and the crust of the protestors as good (environmentalist) and bad (ideological, marginal) groups, respectively. Now, when the answers to various questions are correlated, it can be inferred from the data that the *ulusalcı* (Kemalist-nationalist) elements, as well as certain radical leftist organizations, constitute only a small percentage of the protestors in the Gezi Park, notwithstanding the fact that they and many other less-visible social groups -- such as local ecologists, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) groups, and anti-capitalist Muslims -- found a free public space to express their resentment.

It can rightfully be argued that data on Gezi Park has a limited capacity to represent the nationwide protests. Indeed, Gezi Park as a public space and the social, cultural, and political character of its constituting elements are altogether different from the protests elsewhere in Turkey, even in İstanbul. The protests on Bağdat Street on the Anatolian side of İstanbul, were, for instance, mainly constituted and led by homogenous *ulusalcı* elements. Still, everything began with Gezi Park, through which Taksim proved itself again as the center of İstanbul, which in turn proved itself the true capital of Turkey. The spirit of Gezi Park is, however, still alive in the newly developing Park Assemblies of İstanbul. The rest of the data clearly shows why and how this spirit is a totally new phenomenon in Turkey's conventional politics.

Within the people that were not in the protest in its first days and who constituted the majority of the protestors, a small percentage of the interviewees answered the trigger question with the response, “to

Figure 1:

**Sources of disturbance in Gezi Park**



Gezi Park.<sup>7</sup> When asked what triggered the interviewees to participate in Occupy Gezi, only a small percentage of the answers referred to the destruction of Gezi Park. Indeed, most who pointed to the destruction of the trees in the park as their main motivation had also participated in the first days of the protest; they were the small core of the original protests. The remaining interviewees constituted the huge crust of the protest. Among the triggers for these people's participation in the protest, two main answers outweighed all the others: police brutality and the

overthrow the Government.” These are the people mainly motivated by ideological concerns. For the questions “Why are you here?” and “What do you want?” the anti-Governmental spirit is, as expected, predominant. Within the demand question, ideological motivations could also easily be differentiated by references to certain key concepts (such as the inviolability of the principles of Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk). Again, these constitute a small percentage of the general demands of Occupy Gezi. Nilüfer Göle, in this respect, rightfully observed: “While it is predominantly a secular movement, it does not embrace old State laicism and animosity against Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

In the interviews, the answers to the question “Is there any political organization, flag or motto in the Gezi Park that you feel uncomfortable with?” casts light on the true spirit of Occupy Gezi (Figure 1). The variety of the answers underlines the heterogeneous nature of the protestors in Gezi Park. While 18 percent of the protestors found the posters in Taksim Square showing jailed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan disturbing, another 19 percent were uncomfortable about the nationalist and militarist mottos being chanted -- primarily “We are the Soldiers of Mustafa Kemal,” a reference to Atatürk. It is also significant that 10 percent of protestors expressed their discomfort at swearing and sexist, homophobic and transphobic mottos. Meanwhile the majority, 28 percent, said they were not disturbed by any political expressions, emphasizing that Gezi Park was and should be a public space of freedom, toleration and respect. Finally, 18 percent of protestors found all flags and mottos of political organizations disturbing, arguing that Occupy Gezi should be non-political. This last percentage was composed mostly of young people born in the 1990s and constituted the famous “white generation” of Occupy Gezi. Their denial of politics is actually a critique of Turkey’s ordinary party politics and contains the seed of a new understanding of politics.

The answers to the questions “why are you here?” and “what do you want?” mainly reflect the anti-governmental spirit of Occupy Gezi. Where the ordinary democratic channels of resentment and opposition of the government are lacking, every kind of oppositional demand -- from the former policies of the AK Party government such as the issues of Reyhanlı, Roboski, the third trans-Bosphorus bridge and nuclear energy, to its increasingly authoritarian policies and discourse on individual rights and liberties, as in the issues of abortion



and alcohol -- is being expressed, turning Gezi Park into a platform for pluralist opposition.

In line with the results of the KONDA survey on Occupy Gezi,<sup>9</sup> a great majority of protestors did not align themselves with or feel represented by any political party. Thus, the Gezi events proved that the parliamentary opposition (itself the product of the 10 percent election threshold in Turkey) cannot represent all individuals and social groups rejecting the AK Party, whose hegemonic bloc has been renewed by the recent steps taken towards the resolution of the Kurdish issue.

#### **The promise: a new conception of politics and slaying the Lernaean Hydra**

Instead of denying such a massive uprising as an international conspiracy against the rising power of Turkey or of degrading it into a mere repetition of the old laicist republican rallies of 2007 in a new form, Occupy Gezi should be seen, at the most basic level of analysis, as a popular critique of the present semi-democracy in Turkey. A group spontaneously formed by the secular middle classes, who feel themselves alienated from the hegemonic bloc being reconstructed by the AK Party Government.<sup>10</sup>

However, this basic level of analysis is, by itself, deficient, as it defines Occupy Gezi only through that which it rejects; as a movement essentially against instead of for or to, something. In fact Occupy Gezi has been turning itself, first in Gezi Park and then in the Park Assemblies, into more than an explosion of


**The much-loved Inci patisserie on Istiklal Street was closed as part of plans for a new mall, sparking public outrage.**

**Jan. 31, 2007**  
PHOTO: ZAMAN,  
TURGUT ENGİN



accumulated resentment against the present semi-democracy of Turkey. In its positive meaning, it is a new collective and spontaneous act that attempts to re-conceptualize politics and power by performing freedom in public spaces. This re-conceptualization includes both a deconstructive critique of the conventional conceptions of politics and power, and a creative promise for their potential re-formulation through praxis. Occupy Gezi is, in this respect, an Arendtian phenomenon par excellence.

In her "What is Freedom?" Hannah Arendt argues that philosophy is interested in freedom as a problem only when it has already been lost and is no longer a tangible reality.<sup>11</sup> Occidental philosophy, beginning with Plato, was originally against the political way of life of the Greek polis, which was already declining and whose quintessence was freedom.<sup>12</sup> Arendt equates the original meaning of freedom as the *raison d'être* of politics with action, which can only be attained in praxis by performing it, and which can only be performed in the company of fellow (wo)men in a politically guaranteed public space.<sup>13</sup> By the loss of political freedom as a tangible reality, philosophy developed a metaphysical conception of freedom in the inner realm of the self, i.e., the realm of the intercourse of one with oneself. In this philosophical deduction, freedom is turned into free will, free will into will to power and will to power into will to oppression. Thus, power to of a community that is performed in a free public space turns into the power of an individual/group/community over others. This resembles the mythological monster the Lernaean Hydra.<sup>14</sup>

In Greek mythology, Hercules, in the second of his Twelve Labors, confronted the Lernaean Hydra, an ancient serpent-like chthonic water beast that possessed multiple heads and poisonous breath and blood. As Hercules attacked the monster and cut one of its heads off, two new heads grew back in its place. Just like the Lernaean Hydra, power over reacts to opposition against itself botanically, as it multiplies when defeated. The success of the AK Party government in Turkey lay in its guaranteeing through elections popular support in its struggle against the traditional power holders; the Kemalist civil and military bureaucratic elite. Its failure, which led to Occupy Gezi, was its handling of power exactly as its predecessors did, as the power over. Slaying the beast and breaking free the vicious circle of power over -- i.e., the Lernaean Hydra whose reproducing of heads symbolizes the spontaneous transformation of the oppressed (*mazlum*) into a tyrant (*zalim*) as soon as power is held and secured -- can only be achieved through the spirit of Gezi Park; the spirit of free public spaces of solidarity, respect and empathy where people performed power to as a political community. Contained within this is the seed of a truly democratic, pluralistic, self-governing society. 

## ENDNOTES

1. For a detailed account of the history of urbanization in Turkey through the dichotomy of use-value vs. exchange-value see: Tanık H. Şengül, *Kentsel Çelişki ve Siyaset: Kapitalist Kentleşme Süreçleri üzerine Yazılar* (İstanbul: Dünya Yerel Yönetim ve Demokrasi Akademisi, 2001).
2. For the concept *non-lieu*, invented by French anthropologist Marc Augé, see: Tülin Vural Arslan, "Yok Mekanlar ve Kimliksizlik: Alışveriş Merkezleri Örneğinde Yok - (Çok) - Mekan Olgusu," *Mimarlık* 347 (2010).
3. Hamit Bozarslan, *Ortadoğu'nun Siyasal Sosyolojisi*, Melike Işık Durmaz trans. (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011) 112.
4. For the concepts *folio-city* and *anti-city*, see: Beril Özmen Mayer, "Kent / Anti-Kent Senaryoları," *mimarisi* 29 (2008): 43-49.
5. Note that the term *kıro* is a Kurdish word that originally meant "young male." Through a racist semantic shift, the term has been used as the counterpart of the Turkish word *maganda* (lout). For the discriminative contents of all those concepts in terms of both class and identity see: [www.ayrimcizozluk.blogspot.com](http://www.ayrimcizozluk.blogspot.com).
6. S. Bilal Nur ed., *İstanbullu Olma Bilinci Araştırması*, (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi ve GENAR Sosyal Doku Projesi, 2001) 84.
7. As analysis of the data continues, this report does not contain all the results of the interviews; they will be published soon in another article on Occupy Gezi. I would like to thank my colleague Sophie Menasse from Bogaziçi University for allowing me share some of those results in this article.
8. Nilüfer Göle, "The Gezi Occupation: For a Democracy of Public Spaces", *openDemocracy*, accessed on June 26, 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/nilufer-gole/gezi-occupation-for-democracy-of-public-spaces>
9. See: <http://www.konda.com.tr/>
10. See: Cihan Tugal, "Occupy Gezi: The Limits of Turkey's Neo-Liberal Success," *Jadaliyya*, June 4, 2013, accessed on June 25, 2013, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12009/occupy-gezi\\_the-limits-of-turkey-s-neoliberal-succ](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12009/occupy-gezi_the-limits-of-turkey-s-neoliberal-succ).
11. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 163.
12. *Ibid.*, 157.
13. *Ibid.*
14. For the analogy between the Lernaean Hydra of Greek mythology and power's seeking for power, I would like to thank Stavriani Zervakakou.