

**Gezi Uprising: Performative Democracy and the Politics of/with the Body**

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Psi #23, Kampnagel, Hamburg

June 9, 2017

What I'll be presenting today is part of a chapter I contributed to the book titled "Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity" that Susanne Foellmer co-edited. For the purpose of this panel, I'll focus on two main things: First, I'll talk about how the Gezi protests instantiated a case of "performative democracy." Second, I envision the Gezi Uprising as an instance that allows for rethinking the highly nuanced *bodily* dimensions of "the political". I discuss the standing man protest started by the dancer Erdem Gündüz as *a case of mobilizing vulnerability for resistance*. Multiple perspectives traversing political theory, cultural sociology, media and performance studies, as well as my personal experience of the protests, inform my interpretation. So, I'd like to begin by providing a little background to the events.

**Background**

The Gezi Uprising was the largest wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in the history of modern Turkey. It began on May 27th, 2013, as a sit-in by a group of environmental activists. According to a government-backed construction plan, Gezi Park, a public park in the center of Istanbul, was to be demolished. A replica of an Ottoman-era barracks would be built in its place, housing a shopping mall and a luxury residence complex. On the morning of May 28th, some fifty protesters were camping out in Gezi Park. The police used tear gas to disperse the protesters, and burnt down their tents to allow the bulldozing of the park to continue. Photos of the scene spread across the Internet. The circulation of images and

activists' online calls for support against the police crackdown increased the number of sit-in protesters by the evening. The police carried out yet another raid on the encampment in the early hours of May 31<sup>st</sup>, reportedly resulting in around one hundred injuries. While the protest started at Gezi Park, it quickly transformed into a nation-wide revolt. By May 31st, "Gezi" had become the overarching signifier, standing for a multiplicity of frustrations such as: the growing authoritarianism of the government, interventions of the state into people's lifestyles and choices, the commodification of public goods and spaces under neoliberal policies, nepotism and partisanship, police violence, and the abolition of the democratic mechanisms of checks and balances.

The composition of the protesters was highly heterogeneous and included both organized and non-organized groups. A broad range of social, cultural, and ethnic groups who would not come together under normal conditions, as well as thousands of individuals with no prior political affiliation who felt excluded from the ruling party's definition of "the people," were united in revolt.

### **Performative democracy and the culture of protest**

One could consider Occupy Gezi as an instance of "performative democracy." Cultural sociologist Elzbieta Matynia conceptualizes "performative democracy" as "the life experience and the imagination local people bring to the system" (Matynia 2009: 6)

Especially in light of the recent reformulations of the concept of representation in political philosophy (such as that of Rancière (2006), and lesser known Ankersmit (2002), Saward (2010), among others), one could argue that representative democracy is always already performative. That is, representation, rather than being a relationship of delegation of decision-making between existing, pre-defined entities, is now considered as a *construction* of the represented. Granted that, the notion of performative democracy proposed here does

not contrast with an understanding of representation as *constituted* and *constituting*. However, it contests representational governance based on an understanding of majoritarian rule. In other words, it comes into being when representation is not democratic enough, as when locals are excluded from the decision-making processes about matters that directly concern them by the centralized state. Although performative democracy is not yet another name for “direct democracy” or a rejection of parliamentary democracy, it can emerge to reduce the distance between decision making processes (the government) and the governed, calling for a practice of citizenship that does not end at the ballot box. Furthermore, performative democracy as “the elusive dimension of democracy with its humanity, its drama, its ... inspiring moments ... and its imaginative solutions” (Matynia 2009: 10), is a helpful concept to characterize the affective and the culture-creating features of the Gezi Uprising.

By “performative” I refer to the notion of performativity often traced to J.L. Austin’s (1962) lectures on language. For Austin performative utterances, or “performative speech acts,” do not describe an existing reality out there, but bring it about. In that regard, Occupy Gezi was performative in a double sense. First, although there were concrete demands such as the request that Gezi shall remain a park, protesters did not *re-present a pre-determined* political agenda or give a single preconceived message. Regarding the protesters, the demands, the forms, and the online and offline spaces of protest, the uprising was more than the sum of its parts. It was an emergent reality rather than the representation of pre-scripted messages. Second, it was performative in the way that it enacted the social order it sought to bring about by establishing its own modes of sociability (Butler 2015: 84). That is, through action, speech, as well as silence and gesture, it brought into being the world it imagined to live. Thus, it constituted an alternative to the politically centralized, ideologically conservative and economically neoliberal AKP rule. For instance, most of the activities were

characterized by an anti-capitalist and ecological attitude. Money as the medium of exchange between protestors was abolished. The organization of cooking, preparing and distributing tea, planting and maintaining an organic vegetable garden, painting signs and posters, cleaning the park, and establishing security were all executed on a voluntary basis and without institutional supervision, rules, and administrators.

Protesters reconstituted the Gezi Park as a public space by reclaiming it as a dwelling place where bodies assembled not only in speech and action but also in eating, sleeping, dancing, and dreaming. In that respect, they affirmed their most immediate and obvious statement: that public space belongs to the people.

Once the state apparatus withdrew from Taksim on June 1st, protesters built barricades around the square and declared the area an autonomous, self-governed zone. Over the two weeks that followed, the Gezi Park became a transformative site through which people got uplifted into another reality where an intense communal spirit, the feeling of a great social equality and mutual care prevailed. The sensation of being uplifted was literal and figurative: psychic, affective, temporal and spatial all at once. Many people who were part of the occupation report that it had a pronounced anti-depressant effect. Taksim Square is located on one of the highest hills of the city, and one has to climb the steps or go over the walls at to reach the park, conferring those visiting the park or living in it a sense of elevation.

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1991) would describe this modality of coexistence as *communitas*. For Turner, *communitas* arises through a threshold experience that he calls “liminality”. During the liminal period, Turner maintains, the characteristics of the ritual subject is ambiguous, eluding the normal networks of classification as “they are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” Gezi protesters turned into a *communitas* through the shared corporeal experience and collective resistance against tear gas, water cannons, and plastic

bullets. The psychic and physical sense of elation, feelings of potency, capability, and hope were the affective markers of participants.

The uprising unleashed an explosion of creativity and humor, both online and offline. For Turner, it's during the liminal phase that a ritual has the possibility to be inventive, allowing new situations to emerge. The vast amount of cultural production during and after the protests—such as documentaries, films, novels, photography, music, images, banners, memes, slogans, graffiti, stencils, poems, theater plays, and dance performances, and so on — suggest that it's important to study the event, not only as a social and political upheaval, but also as a site of cultural production.

In the early days of the protests, Tayyip Erdoğan, who was then the prime minister, referred to the protesters as a few *çapulcus* (which means “looters” or “plunderers”) to discredit their political claims and portray them as vandals threatening social order. In the same speech, he also criticized social media, calling Twitter a “menace” and an “extreme version of lying.” The term *çapulcu* was taken up by the protesters to be endowed with a new meaning. By changing their names to *çapulcu* or different versions of it overnight on their social media profiles, protesters and their supporters marked their membership to an emergent community. *Çapulling* became a practice of resistance. Evoking the festive environment of Gezi, a user with the alias “huang park” uploaded on June 7<sup>th</sup> 2013 a humorous video photo-shopped over the electronic dance music duo LMFAO's *Party Rock Anthem* where the refrain of the song “Everyday I'm Shuffling” became “Everyday I'm Çapulling.” It depicts the aftermath of excessive partying. Let's have a look. **Slide # 2**

It's remarkable that dance in many forms—choreographed or improvised—was ever-present during the protests; in a way affirming that the body was both the medium and the message, that what was at stake was precisely the freedom, mobility and well-being of embodied existence. A Sufi dervish-inspired dancer in a gas mask whirled at different

locations around the park and Taksim Square throughout the protests. Although it was a more traditional format, with a virtuoso dancer as the center of attention of a group of onlookers, the mediation of its photographs over social media opened up the form for appropriation.

### **Slide # 3 + 4**

Among the dances of Gezi, one could also observe traditional circular folk dances, such as the *horon* and the *halay*. *Halay*, in particular, was a permanent feature of the park, as it's a form that's become affiliated with the Kurdish resistance and leftist movements. It was practiced continually at multiple spots of the park, often bringing together groups of people in unlikely combinations, such as ultra-nationalists joining a Kurdish *halay*. Let's have a look at one *halay* video. **Slide/video # 5**

Some protesters practiced yoga daily and held open classes. Others performed ballroom dances such as the tango, which has a large local following. Among a multitude of solidarity rallies from across the world, groups of dancers from Finland and Greece organized tango sessions and sent their messages to the Gezi protesters via social media.

Besides collective and anonymous performances, individual ones also abounded in and around the protests. For instance, German pianist Davide Martello aka klavierkunst, known for traveling around to play in conflict zones, held a concert in Taksim Square to thousands of protesters who sang along songs of solidarity and hope.

### **Vulnerability and resistance**

In her recent work focusing on understanding the dynamics of current forms of public assembly, Judith Butler (2015) draws on Hannah Arendt's concept of political action, yet improves it by highlighting the nuanced role of the body in politics and the *non-discursive* dimensions of political communication. Besides being embodied forms of questioning the

political order, Butler also emphasizes that the body is at the center of most recent assemblies, taking what she calls “precaritization” as their motivating condition.

Let me clarify the concepts precariousness, precarity, and precaritization as used here: For Butler, precariousness is a general feature of embodied life, a dimension of corporeality and social interdependence. Precarity, however, is the condition where precariousness is augmented under certain policies (or the lack thereof). Precaritization denotes the entire processes through which precarity is induced, such as militarization, securitization, police actions, economic, and environmental policies.

So, in that regard, with the eradication of green spaces, parks, clean water, that is, a livable environment, and the violent crushing of opposition by the police, bodies are rendered even more vulnerable, that is, precaritized.

On May 28th, the Reuters photographer Osman Orsal captured the moment when a police officer was pepper-spraying a young woman in a red summer dress. The photo quickly spread over the world media, with the “lady in red” becoming the first iconic symbol of the escalating revolt. **Slide #6**

On June 17th, the day after the violent crackdown of the encampment at Gezi Park, the dancer/choreographer Erdem Gündüz engaged in a non-violent act of resistance that was later dubbed “duran adam” which translates as “the man who is standing still”. Standing in the middle of Taksim Square, uncannily empty except for some undercover police and the press, facing the Atatürk Cultural Center, Gündüz began an eight-hour vigil. The protest was initially anonymous and was meant to be so. However, as depicted by the video recorded by guerilla cameras, the police began to poke and question him, checked his backpack and identification card. Therefore, his name was revealed to the public. The video of the interaction went viral and portrayed how confused the police was about how to respond to what looked like a non-action. **Slide #7**

In a matter of hours, thanks to the amplification and circulation of the image on social media and the everyday accessibility and power of the act itself, the standing protest went viral, both as a graphic meme and as a performative act of the most basic non-violent resistance, all over Turkey and beyond. It uplifted the broken spirits and carried the protests to a different intensity. Standing still and still standing was what was left to be done and emerged as a form of social aikido when other possibilities and the right to assemble were crushed by state violence. (The martial art of aikido is characterized by defusing the energy of an opponent's forceful attack, transforming the ensuing energy to one's advantage).

Moreover, the political force of the "standing man" action is not only in its verticality, in the manner of rising up in dignity after the fall of the protests, but also in its stillness, its non-violence, and the body's sheer vulnerability. Here, stillness emerges not as a form of passivity, but rather a thoughtful and strategic cultivation of resistance that refuses to participate in the aggression it opposes.

Stillness introduced by the "standing man" protest is also an explicit refusal; a blatant "no" to be removed, no to be dispossessed, to insist on remaining public, to keep on laying claim to the public space.

The standing man protest of Erdem Gündüz also exemplified a form of embodied politics of memory and space. According to the anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, "still acts" are those moments of pause and arrest in which the subject interpellates "historical dust" by introducing a physical disruption in the flow of temporality (Seremetakis 1996, 11-12). Against the flow of the present, Seremetakis maintains: "Stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust" (Seremetakis 1996, p.12).

The historical dust at Taksim Square is very thick, indeed. Taksim has been a contested space, the site of competing narratives and ideological projects since the latter days

of the Ottoman Empire. After the founding of the Republic of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Taksim was built as part of the image of a pro-western, secular modern nation state. In turn, in a revanchist manner, the AKP government has been trying to rebuild Taksim befitting its conservative, Islamist, neo-imperialist agenda, which is one of the primary reasons that led to the protests. Taksim Square has also been the site of workers' struggles and social protests, most memorably of the May 1st, 1977, Labor Day massacre. Moreover, some protesters discovered for the first time during the Gezi occupation that the place where Gezi Park now stands was once an Armenian cemetery.

### **Concluding remarks: *movement* or *moment*?**

From the perspective of some theories of social movements, one could contend that the Gezi uprising failed to develop into a fully-fledged social movement to affect wider change. In the aftermath of Gezi, Turkey experienced a downward spiral into a dictatorship of sorts. Furthermore, the military coup attempt on July 15<sup>th</sup> last year, the details of which remain in the dark to this day, gave the government the excuse to rule the country by executive decrees, further crushing the opposition, outlawing associational activities and the rights of assembly. In that regard, the Gezi marked a *moment* rather than a *movement* (Gitlin 2013: 3).

But, perhaps, it is the temporariness of such public assemblies that endows them with critical power (Butler 2015: 20). Although it cannot be easily institutionalized, such moments of performative democracy leave behind a vital legacy, releasing a "robust civic creativity" (Matynia 2009: 9). And, I think, one of the most enduring and significant contributions of Gezi protests was the deployment of creativity and humor as tools of resistance.

Describing the trajectory of the life of democracy, Matynia introduces the terms carnival and lent as metaphors to capture both democracy's potential and its vulnerability—fertility, imagination, and generosity on the one hand, intellectual poverty, complacency, and

abuse on the other. She reminds us that a period of lent, a period of stagnation, can even come about in relatively established democracies, where the space of appearance is shrunken or gone, and the conditions of agency are crushed. At times like this, Matynia asserts, performative democracy has the potential to infuse undemocratic environments with some democratic qualities. Although it's not a real alternative to tanks and bullets, it emerges as a force that can help people's backs straighten up (9).

Today, in the face of the global rise of despair, cynicism, and fear, the question of how to cultivate the conditions that generate dignity and hope remains more timely and urgent than ever. Thank you.

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