

## What Emerged in the Gezi Park Occupation in Istanbul?

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Looking at the demonstrations and occupations in central squares and public spaces in cities across the Middle East and North Africa regions, Saskia Sassen asserts that the city has returned “as a site for the making of political and civic changes”, and also as a “heuristic space—a space capable of producing knowledge about some of the major transformations of an epoch” (Sassen 2011, 576). In her essay, she then focuses on what she argues to be the “two key features of the current period where cities are such a lens that helps us situate a larger process.” “One of these”, she continues, “was what urban uprisings tell us about the limits of superior military force”; the other, “on a very different subject, these urban uprisings show us both the limits and the potential of the new communications technologies, especially social media” (Ibid., 579).

Erik Swyngedouw, reflecting in a similar vein on what he calls the “insurgent mobilisations” of recent times across the world—from Tunisia to Spain, from Egypt and Turkey to Brazil—suggests that these movements “call for a revisiting of the nature of ‘the political’” (Swyngedouw

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2014, 123). According to him, these movements invite us to interrogate “the return of the political”—the political as “a procedure that disrupts any given socio-spatial order by staging equality and exposing a ‘wrong’” (Ibid., 128).

So, we have two positions here, using different analytical frameworks, but both seeking to understand the meaning and significance of the demonstrations and mobilisations that have been taking place in recent times in various cities across the globe. In Sassen’s case, we have a focus on the city as a strategic site for change, and hence it is the return of the city that is the highlight of the demonstrations. In Swyngedouw’s case, it is the return of the political itself. In this chapter, I will try to bring together these seemingly separate lines of argument, and focus on the relationship between city and politics. My starting point is that both oppositional movements and the state are space making practices. Following the argument of Jacques Rancière, the state here refers to all those activities that create order by regulating, arranging and putting into effect how people are going to live, where, under what names; by decreeing what is going to be situated where, who is to be allowed to speak, and so forth. Jacques Rancière calls this form of statism “*la police*”. Quoting from Rancière, Swyngedouw maintains that “[T]he police are a rule that regulates the appearance of bodies, configures a set of activities and occupations and arranges the characteristics of the space where these activities are organised or distributed” (Swyngedouw 2014, 128). What is more, as Swyngedouw states, “[T]he essence of the police is the principle of saturation: it is a mode of the partition of the sensible that recognises neither lack nor supplement. As conceived by ‘the police’, a society is a totality comprised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces.” “This drive to suturing,” however, Swyngedouw argues, “is of course never fully realised as other modes of being-in-common or forms of communing and of constructing a political community are constantly emerging, yet are not recognised as such” (Ibid.).

We can arguably go on to make the claim that the city itself is a machine that can potentially hamper this suturing, no matter the effectiveness of the principle of saturation. The city is a fertile ground for those who are as yet invisible to find shelter. The city, more than any other space of human society, has the potential to escape total ordering, and thus affords the possibility for the occurrence of acts of dissensus. This is because, as Martin Coward argues, cities are “spaces in which

difference proliferates and mixes” (Coward 2012, 471). Complexity and plurality, which are the defining qualities of the city, entail, not a community of identical subjects, but, on the contrary, “a coexistence of substantially different subjects”(Ibid.). These different subjects are all engaged in space-making practices that disrupt the totalising establishment of any one particular regime of spatial urban design. Thus, we may claim, the city can never really be saturated with any single understanding of order. What has been distinctive and innovative about the occupation movements that have been taking place across global cities, is the way in which thousands of previously unarticulated passions for interruption to ‘police’-order have come together, and have been amplified, particularly, in the city’s most symbolic space—the central square—as well as in its other ‘performative’ spaces (avenues, streets, courtyards). Not only did these passions, and consequent experiences that they gave rise to, become available to share, but this very act of sharing became the source for the generation of quite unanticipated forms of spontaneous civic expression. In the Gezi Park occupation in Istanbul for instance (I will move on to discuss it in what follows), the first thing that the occupiers did was to clean the park. Swynegedouw characterises such new happenings in terms of the return of the political to the urban space. This is how he describes it:

The insurgents have no demands; they do not expect anything from The Police. They have no program, no pronouncements; neither leader nor party. Perhaps they are part of what Andy Merrifield calls the Imaginary Party, one that is called into being through resonance, viral infection and affiliation, not through hierarchy and structure. They do not demand equality, they stage it and, in doing so, produce... equalibertarian spaces. This staging of equality, the interruption of the normalized geographical order of the sensible, exposes the aristocratic configuration and inegalitarian “wrongs” of the given, and invariably encounters The Police’s wrath. Such exposition cannot remain unnoticed: it either succeeds or meets with the terror of The State that—in its violent acting—precisely affirms that some people are not part of The People, that the police order is indeed inegalitarian. (Swynegedouw 2012, 326)

Thus, through insurgent mobilisations, the city returns as a political space. That is to say, “it becomes the polemical place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated” (Dikeç 2005, 172). The “wrong”, Swynegedouw (2014, 129) maintains, “is the experience and

practice of inequality that inheres in the oligarchic spaces of an instituted polity.” These political acts stage “collectively the presumption of equality” (Swynegedouw 2012, 325).

In what follows, I want to examine the significance of Taksim Square in Istanbul—it was the place where the Gezi Park occupation took place in the summer of 2013. Through this discussion, I want to show how a space that has been wholly defined by the system (Rancière’s “police”) as an exclusively state-symbolic space, can be refigured through the acts of subversive politics. Gezi Park was an urban space that turned into a political space in which political subjects—by which I mean, subjects of an alternative kind—came into being. These new political subjects, through their *detourning* actions of the urban space of Gezi Park injected a completely unexpected handling of that space, challenging the dominant spatial logic of the state. In reconfiguring this particular space, the whole order of the city was being questioned. For certain, Gezi Park was not only a stage for dissent. The park became the material, quite literally, for an alternative kind of politics, involving the physical occupation and reshaping of a city space, by those who had hitherto had no meaningful part to play within the logic of the dominant system (the ‘police’ order). Self-empowering political subjects were rendering contentious the givenness of a particular regime of meaning and power. And the ‘givenness’, in this case, concerned the way the city, governed by the logic of the dominant order of things, led to citizens’ rights to the city being progressively undermined and abrogated. Politics, as staged at Gezi Park, were confronting the neoliberal logic that sutured the entire city edifice; they were making visible the deadening normalisation of the city as an inequality-producing machine. Keith Bassett (2014, 888) has observed that a key characteristic of the occupation movements has been the way in which “the so-far invisible, unheard ‘part with no-part’ irrupted into the space of the police.” Thus, in the Gezi context, ‘ordinary’ people, from very different walks of life, from different political leanings, ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic groups, life-style choices, and so on, came together, and by doing so, they discovered their hitherto obscured qualities, such as being able to engage with each other, in solidarity across identity and political divides. The way the urban regime had been ordering identities among the city’s population was totally disrupted. This was the Gezi Spirit. As İrem İnçeoğlu notes, the Gezi Spirit “was borne out by the number of occasions when we witnessed the eagerness and enthusiasm of different groups of people showing solidarity with others” (İnçeoğlu 2014).

### ÇAPULCU—WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Erik Swyngedouw starts his analysis of what he calls the new forms of insurgency by situating them in context of the contemporary urban context, which he depicts as having become, up to this point, “the ZERO-ground of politics”—“a de-politicised post-political and post-democratic city” (Swyngedouw 2011, 23). The contemporary urban condition, he continues, became “marked by a post-political police order of managing the spatial distribution and circulation of things and people within a consensually agreed neoliberal arrangement.” Under these conditions, “the polis as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the spacing of (often radical) dissent, and disagreement, and the place where political subjectivization emerges, is performed and thus literally takes place, seems moribund” (Ibid.).

However, all is not yet lost for the city, Swyngedouw believes. He sees in contemporary urban insurrections, such as the Occupy movements, “events” that are now setting in motion a challenge to the established order of things, and thereby opening spaces for the political. Swyngedouw puts forward the argument that Occupy movements represent “the affirmation of impossibility of consensual management, of autocratic rule.” “Such political events,” says Swyngedouw (2011, 25), “are interventions that transgress the symbolic order and mark a shift to a new situation that can no longer be thought of in terms of the old symbolic framings.” We may surely make such a claim with respect to the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in the summer of 2013, which then developed into a major Occupy ‘event’ in the park itself—that Gezi was such an instance in which the city was able to re-establish its vital connection with politics.

The key question concerns what made the Gezi Park protests different from other urban social protest movements, such as May Day demonstrations, or demonstrations by neighbourhood associations against gentrification projects. What is it that made these protests stand out as constituting actions that change “the very framework that determines how things work...[that change] the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation”? (Slavoj Žižek, quoted in Swyngedouw 2011, 25). The Gezi Park protests started out as a protest against the cutting down of trees in Gezi Park, as part of the central government’s plans to turn the whole park, and Taksim Square with it, into a ‘monumental’ recreational and shopping area. Within a matter

of days, as a result of the violent crackdown by the police forces, this initially small-scale peaceful protest turned into the occupation of the entire park over a period of 2 weeks, and, concomitantly, led to the spread of solidarity demonstrations in urban centres across the whole of Turkey, and also abroad, in Europe. There is by now quite a substantial body of English-language accounts of the Gezi Park demonstrations, documenting the unfolding of events, and analysing their meaning and potential for alternative politics (see Tuğal 2013; Abbas and Yiğit 2015; Inceoğlu 2015). For İrem Inceoğlu (2015, 538, 540), “the two-week occupation of Gezi Park and Taksim Square converted this recreational area into a radical democratic public space.” People were equal in their speech and action, and “everything was organized on a voluntary basis and in solidarity”.

What was particularly significant about the Occupy ‘event’ in Gezi Park, and then about the ensuing neighbourhood forums that gathered to debate the event and its potential, was that they brought together a whole array of different groups: ‘ordinary’ people with no political affiliations, members of trade unions and civil society organisations, different political party constituencies, environmentalists, feminists, gay-lesbian-transgender activists, anti-capitalist muslims, artists, teachers, students, and so on. Those who ordinarily have no voice, no visibility and no place in the political realm, suddenly became political actors. As Keith Bassett (2014, 893) says of the whole wave of contemporary occupations of major public spaces in metropolitan centres, they “were often seen by the participants themselves as a process of creating new subjects and subjectivities, rather than simply bringing together temporary coalitions of established protest organisations.” This togetherness has had no unifying flag, no hierarchical decision-making structure, nor any leader. It has existed as a form of “insubstantial community”—a term that Bassett uses to refer to collectivities that do not constitute a singular unity. Such communities—or, better, free associations—of the Occupy movements, says Bassett, “developed their own rules as they evolved, performatively maintaining a commitment to radical equality through practices such as open assemblies, the drawing of lots of speakers, and the ‘human microphone’” (Bassett 2014, 893). Thus, Gezi Park became a dissensual space, one that “that offered the right to speak to those whose voice was only recognized as noise” (Kaika and Karaliotas 2014, 4). As noted about the preceding protests in Syntagma Square in 2011 by Kaika and Karaliotas, the Gezi Park protests also “succeeded not only in expressing dissent,

but also imagining and materialising alternative ways of being, doing and saying in common" (Ibid., 10).

In *Ten Theses on Politics* (2001), Jacques Rancière makes the observation that "[I]f there is someone you do not wish to recognise as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths." The people of Istanbul had existed as such unseen ones; they had become silent collaborators in the neoliberal consensus, resigned to accepting the conditions of life that had been imposed on them. The Gezi occupation radically disrupted this regime of conformism.

The Gezi events, involving 2 weeks of living in, and sharing, this urban public space, were about finding and elaborating alternative ways of being, thinking and collaborating. As with other Occupy events across the world, citizens were struggling to create different forms of subjectivity from the ones that had been allocated to them. It is ironic that it was the pejorative taunt screamed at the protestors by the then prime minister, Tayyip Erdoğan, in order to denounce them, *çapulcu*, that then came to serve as a way of honourably naming the hitherto unnamed. *Çapulcu*, which means marauder or looter, was, wittily and inventively, appropriated by the Gezi Park protesters to proclaim their new and defiant stance of disidentification with the existing order of things. The *çapulcu* citizens proliferated, as the overwhelming disposition in the city, of frustration, of resentment and of despondent fatalism turned into fury. It was the deepening sense of inconsequentiality felt by many of Istanbul's citizens that turned them into new political subjects.

### TAKSİM SQUARE AS SYMBOL OF A NEW CULTURAL POLITICS

The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government was totally committed and determined in its project to develop the Taksim square area. It was a project that carried with it a mission to reinvent the identity of the Square and the Park. Essentially, it was about imposing its own authority, culture and identity on a space that had long been the symbolic space of the republican secular state since the early twentieth century. And the Gezi protesters, in their opposition to the AKP's cultural, political and economic offensive, stood in the way of the Party's projected ascendancy over Turkish social reality. Hence the enormity of the wrath displayed by the AKP government, and by its police forces, towards

the protestors—12 people dead, over 11,000 wounded or hospitalised, 10 people losing an eye, and over 5000 taken into custody.

Let us reflect upon this deadly anger, and upon the frenzied obsession with Gezi. Gezi Park, situated at the heart of Taksim Square, and designed by the French architect Henri Prost in the early years of Republican Turkey, became the symbol of ‘modern’ Istanbul. Its modernist design reflected the secular and Westernising aspirations of the early Republican era. Prost replaced the run down Ottoman military barracks, *Topçu Kışlası*, that had once stood there, creating an urban garden with extensive green areas, arranging a leisurely space for promenade, erecting a municipal venue for celebrations and ceremonies for commemoration of the founding of the Republic, and organising the space as a square available to the new, modern public of the period. In the course of time, Taksim Square became the central place for public manifestations, such as the 1st of May demonstrations, adding a further symbolic significance, as the centre for the visibility of civic politics in Turkey. The AKP government’s plan for Taksim Square and Gezi Park involved the total transformation of the entire area, involving the re-building of the long-gone Ottoman military barracks in the place of Gezi Park, and the turning of the Square into a pedestrian zone. However the pedestrianisation plan meant the digging of tunnels at each entry point to the Square, in order to take motor traffic underground. The connectivity of the Square would thereby be severed, hampering the flow of large masses of people wanting to participate in public demonstrations. This represented a major assault upon the established public use of Taksim Square as an urban arena for public demonstrations and public visibility, as well as upon its significance as a symbolic space of the modern, secular city. The announced plans for the ‘resurrected’ garrison was that a shopping mall would be housed within it. As Bülent Eken (2014, 430) observes, here was “one of the latest works of simulation in which the conservative past and contemporary capital consummate their affair.”

In fact, the AKP government’s attempts at transforming Taksim Square began to take shape in 2007, when the Minister of Culture announced plans to demolish the Atatürk Cultural Centre (*Atatürk Kültür Merkezi*, or AKM), situated in the Square. The declared aim was to raze this landmark building, and to replace it with a ‘grand’ congress hall and cultural centre. The AKM had long served as the permanent base for the Istanbul State Theatre, the State Opera and Ballet, and the State Symphony Orchestra; but, more than that, it also stood,



emblematically, in this highly symbolic urban location, for the ‘modern’ and secular values of Kemalist republicanism. Now, the building was set to be the stage for the AKP’s assertion of its power, authority and competing identity claims. The initial proposal for the project was focused on creating a gentrified edifice that would reflect the ambitions and aspirations of the new Islamic and conservative elites. However, not much was said with respect to its architectural or cultural elements at that time. This early attempt at urban cultural overhaul was met by a huge resistance from civil society. The AKP proposal for a new cultural centre was interpreted—and quite rightly, I believe—as a tactical move intended to wipe out the legacy of the modern Republican period.

On this occasion, the AKP government was compelled to give ground. Instead of being demolished, the AKM building was simply closed down. This closure forced its cultural occupants to relocate to much smaller venues in other parts of the city. As the days and weeks and months went by, and void of occupancy and activity, the building fell into decline and decay. The struggle of civil society organisations, and of the city’s local and international arts institutions, to halt the deterioration of the building came to nothing. By the summer of 2013, when the Gezi Park protests broke out, the AKM was effectively a ruin. The clearing of the AKM, which shared the same symbolic space as Taksim Square, had, effectively, been achieved by that time.

The directive to turn the Gezi Park, and Taksim Square with it, into a ‘monumental’ recreational and shopping zone came from Ankara, and not from the metropolitan authorities in Istanbul. This symbolic realignment was going to be achieved through the reinstitution of a long-gone Ottoman military barracks, *Topçu Kışlası*, which had once stood where Gezi Park is today. And, this time round, the programme for the proposed reconstruction carried with it an explicit cultural symbolism, accompanying the gentrifying logic as seen before in the case of the attempted bulldozing of AKM. *Topçu Kışlası*’s architecture, in late-Ottoman military style, was to be reproduced—by now, of course, it could only reappear in the form of kitsch. The clear intention was to make a public statement about the cultural values of the AKP—to signal the party-state’s aspirations towards the propagation of a ‘new’ conservative-Islamic urban aesthetics.

By now in its third term in government, the AKP was feeling confident enough to challenge the hitherto prevailing secular-Republican hegemony over Turkish culture and identity—a hegemony that the AKP

bitterly disliked and resented. Conservative writers and columnists were complaining, moreover, about their lack of adequate representation in the cultural public domain. In this context, a deliberately provocative initiative was instituted, in 2012, with the announcement that legislation to privatise the State Theatres was being prepared. The government bill, originating directly from the prime minister's office, aimed to decommission state cultural institutions, notably the State Theatre and the State Opera and Ballet—institutions that had been regarded by their founders as the harbingers of modern 'civilisational' values. It was a clear statement and declaration of the AKP's resolve to overhaul and realign the Turkish cultural domain as it saw fit, in line with its project for the foundation of a coming neo-Ottoman 'civilisation'—nothing less—as conceived in its so-called 'New Turkey' project. As Mustafa İsen, former President Abdullah Gül's General Secretary, and a deputy for the AKP, explained all too clearly in 2013:

Now, to be frank, among the demands of the key actors of this government's long March, the demand for economic change was probably not the only one in the changes they asked for in Turkey. But when we turn and look at the developments of the past 10 years, Turkey has really transformed economically. It was to be expected, however, that there should also be cultural and civilisational changes. (Koyuncu 2013)

In the founding years of the Republic, the cultural secular elites had believed that it was their cultural obligation to abandon the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, while setting up a new nation state and establishing a new national identity. 90 years later, Turkish conservatives were now proposing a 'return' to the Ottoman legacy, claiming that this should serve as the basis for the 'civilisational' gesture that they were formulating for the heralded 'New Turkey'.

The project of re-building the by now totally forgotten Ottoman *Topçu Kışlası* signalled the AKP's determination to re-establish cultural connection to this Ottoman 'heritage'—the connection that had been severed as part of the modernising logic of the early Republic. This amounted to a spatial-territorial articulation of the broader cultural-ideological identity agenda of the conservative-Islamic AKP. Taksim Square was set to become the physical stage on which to perform this new conservative identity. Having already rendered the AKM dysfunctional by letting the emptied building fall into unreclaimable decay, the mission to

impose a conservative identity across the whole Square would be complete. This would constitute a symbolic act of historic significance: the ‘conquest’ of Taksim Square, and its consequent reconstruction to reflect a radically new—albeit ‘traditional’ and conservative-religious—image of contemporary Turkish society. The ‘conquest’ strategy posits the global city Istanbul as “the Islamic or neo-Ottoman symbol of a new regional hegemony, or even as a significant instrument in establishing this hegemony” (Bora 1995). This, then, was what lay behind Ankara’s obsession with Gezi Park and Taksim Square.

### TAKSIM SQUARE AS EXPRESSION OF THE ‘NEW ISTANBUL’ PROJECT

There is more that may be said concerning the blind and relentless drive to transform Taksim Square. This project is part and parcel of the total and devastating restructuring of Istanbul that has been taking place over the last decade or so, especially, on the basis of the market-driven and state-enforced neoliberal urban politics of the present government. This neoliberal urban policy has sought to position the city as the key to national growth, and as a platform for global power and cultural assertion. And this strategy of global repositioning is having major implications for the nature and the quality of the lives of those who live in the city.

Taking our cue from what Stuart Hodgkinson (2012) has referred to as “neoliberal urban enclosure”, we may characterise this strategy for the transformation and repositioning of Istanbul in terms of the ‘enclosure of the idea of the city’. We may say that, in Istanbul, “neoliberal urban enclosure” has become a generalised state of affairs over the last decade or so. A ‘wrecking ball’<sup>1</sup> has been assembled by the government to expropriate what, in effect, belongs to the public, and to turn over the last remaining common lands of the city to mega-corporations in order for them to build what the AKP has dubbed the ‘new Istanbul’. The ‘wrecking ball’ metaphor conveys the sheer power and determination of the enclosure action—and, shockingly, highlights the displacement of, and total disregard for, deliberative decision-making processes with the top-down implementations of the executive branches and organizations of the government.

When we look at one of the most spectacular privatisations of public land in Istanbul, we can see how this logic of urban enclosure involves

at one and the same time the physical annexation of the city and the subjugation of the lifeworlds of its inhabitants. Situated in a very central location of the city, in Zincirlikuyu, right in the heart of the central business district, and within the impact zone of the Bosphorus natural and historic site—and, hence, presented as having a spectacular view across the Bosphorus strait—10 hectares of public land belonging to the National Highways Authority were sold, in 2007, by the state's Privatisation Agency for US\$ 800 million. And, on this appropriated land, one of the most contested mega real-estate development projects of the new millennium was initiated (one commentator dubbed it a 'Frankenstein's monster') the Zorlu Center (named after its owner). In order to enable this construction, the existing regulations regarding building density rules and planning procedures in the area were 'revised' and 'improved'. Even though professional associations, such as the Town Planners Association, took the case to court, arguing that the project was seriously infringing well-established regulations concerning the special status of the area, and also subverting the legal framework that restricted the transfer of public land to private exploitation, nothing came of their complaints. The monstrous Zorlu Centre, with its overwhelming office and residential blocks, shopping malls, and entertainment and recreational spaces, was engineered into existence, a hulking corporate contribution to the skyline of the 'new Istanbul' signifying the gentrified and exclusive life-style of the up and coming.

In recent years, we have been witnessing more and more of such land privatisations, with public-private partnerships developing large-scale real-estate projects in industrial zones, public and treasury lands, agricultural lands, water reservoir areas, etc. Poor inner-city historic districts, as well as the informal settlement areas of working-class migrants have been subjected to commodification and privatisation processes that have led to dispossession, marginalisation, and total destruction of what had made them part of the commons of the city. We have witnessed the literal enclosure of a centuries-old Gypsy district within the historic walls of the city—Sulukule—involving the total and comprehensive dispossession of the Roma population, and the transformation of their once established space through a gentrifying real-estate development. A similar development has been taking place in Tarlabası, an old district of the Christian-Greek inhabitants of Istanbul, where a huge swathe of the neighbourhood has been demolished to allow for the construction of historic-looking (*sic*) lofts and apartments, affordable only to those

with significant financial resources. The historic Yedikule market gardens (*bostanlar*), adjacent to the historic city land walls, an important legacy from the city's Byzantine and Ottoman past, are in the process of being razed, and replaced by recreational parks intended for the enjoyment of local residents of gentrified housing complexes. And so it goes on.

The logic of urban enclosure marches relentlessly onwards, targeting public lands, agricultural areas, forests, the sea shore, and wherever there is a sizeable profit to be made. And—were there space here to do so—I could go on, almost endlessly, and, in doing so, considerably amplify the seriousness of what is taking place in contemporary Istanbul. I could address the construction of the Third Bosphorus bridge to the North of the city, and then the construction of the gargantuan new airport, also in the Northern zone—these are mega-projects that will impact massively on what is a vital forest and water reservoir area; and, as such, they are projects that announce certain ecological devastation for the city. However, the particular point that I want to make here concerns the vast ambition driving the plans for AKP government's 'New Istanbul'—this was a slogan that was mobilised at the time of the local elections in 2011,<sup>2</sup> with the claim to be making a radical break with an imagined and declared 'old' urban order. The 'new Istanbul' tells us about the nature of the 'existing order of things'—a rolling out of the full power of the state with its high commissions, courts, police force, mass housing authority, the entire executive branch in the form of central and local governments with the aim of implementing a neoliberal urban agenda. As many writers and commentators have argued, this amassing of power has led to "increased displacement and dispossession of the urban poor and heightened levels of spatial and socioeconomic segregation" (Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010, 2); that is to say to a heightened and intensified unequal distribution of rights to the city.

### THE OCCUPATION OF TAKSIM GEZI PARK

On 30 May 2013, a small group of citizens—yes, let us call them citizens—went to Gezi Park to watch over the bulldozers that had been sent by the municipality to cut down some of the trees there, as part of the government's obsessive-compulsive project to develop the park space. They were met with police force. The next day, 31 May, this small gathering of protesters swelled to tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, confronting the full might of the police in the streets around

Taksim. By midday of 1 June, the police, for whatever reasons, decided to withdraw from Gezi Park and Taksim Square. On 2 June, the Park was occupied by the thousands who had been in the streets protesting. As one chronicler of the events describes it, “people filled in the park area, like happy children, looking around, but not knowing what to do. This was our park wasn’t it? People were smiling at each another. Then, suddenly, people set about cleaning the park space” (Güven 2013). People who had been displaced from their homes by real-estate developments were there. Those who had been protesting against the destruction of a much loved historic cinema (*Emek Sineması*) in Beyoğlu, close by Taksim Square, were there. Those who were suffering from a deepening sense of personal inconsequentiality in the face of Istanbul’s neoliberal transformation were there. Those who had been feeling frustration, resentment and outrage in the face of the destruction of the green-belt zone of the city were there in the park. Women from all walks of life were there, voicing their anger towards government policies that were bringing tighter regulations on abortion, and promoting a deeply conservative rendering of women’s role in society—they too were making their presence felt. Young people from all sections of society were participating, voicing their anger against what they experienced as the repression of their chosen lifestyles. Gays, lesbians, transsexuals, they came to make manifest their protests about the ‘official’ culture that always turned a blind eye towards homophobic crimes. Environmentalists, militantly objecting to the Turkish state’s devastation of the natural world, they too were there. Thinking people, despairing people, concerned people, determined people—they all made their way to what had become for them the possibility space of Gezi Park. The Gezi events emerged, in large part, out of the disturbed and upset mood of the citizens who are actually, co-producers of the city’s life and meaning—out of their desperation, as they came to find the changed nature and terms of co-production ever more stressful, intolerable, disrespectful. What they could no longer bear was a mentality of urban governance, an increasingly alien mentality, that was predicated almost exclusively on economic growth through gentrification, construction, land commodification and greed. They could no longer breathe in an urban society that had ever less acceptance of social and personal freedom, ever less awareness of the complexity and diversity of the city’s population, ever less respect for the voice and the rights of citizens. Citizens of Istanbul flocked to Gezi Park wanting to experiment with different forms of political, cultural and

artistic expression and visibility, with different ways of living and being in the urban space.

In the course of just a few days, Gezi Park was covered with tents, and camping protesters were sharing day and night shifts to guard their newly reclaimed space. And then there was a ‘revolutionary market’, a market at which no money was needed, and a common kitchen, a library, a health centre, an organic vegetable garden, a forum area, a TV station, a radio station... Thousands upon newly energised thousands of people from across the city visited the park every day, bringing resources to the protestors (food, cleaning materials, books, etc.). Fans of rival football teams were there from the start, arm in arm, and always in a celebratory harmony of purpose. There were free classes for children; sessions for such activities as meditation, yoga, and physical exercise; there were speeches (in the democratic spirit of free speech), talks and discussions in the people’s forum area. The emergent democratic culture made a space for sitting around, sleeping, reading, talking, singing, discussing, and just plain and simple being together. The spirit of the Gezi Park resistance is perhaps captured in the observation that it was “queer”—“that anyone could become the other” in this creatively generated atmosphere in which “identity positions (including those of football fans) and borders [were] questioned, where othering mechanisms [were] left behind, where ‘everything’ [was] shared” (Altınay 2013, 306). Bodies appeared together, bodies of people who do not know one another, bodies from all kinds of lifeworlds, they all came together, body-to-body, face-to-face, on a daily basis. Invoking the work of Judith Butler, Ayşe Gül Altınay mobilises the concept of “queer solidarity” to describe what emerged in the course of the Gezi Park actions. Istanbul’s symbolic centre became host to a celebratory staging of the principles of freedom, equality, respect, peace and solidarity—the event amounted to a radical ‘queering’ of everything that the ‘police’ regime stood for. The democratic festival lasted only until 15 June, when the malevolent forces of the police returned to drive the demonstrators out of the park area, taking the place under ‘police’ control again through repressive and brutal use of violence.<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Gezi Park resistance was essentially about the clash of two opposed principles: that of authoritarianism and inequality, on the one hand, as against that of democratic aspirations to equality, on the other. This

confrontation was staged through an *event*—by which is meant an “unforeseen rupture to the system” (Bassett 2014, 898), an unanticipated disruption to the system—the system that configures the spaces we live in, the shape and course of our lives, and forming of our sense of self and identity. The occupation of the park by the *çapulcu* tribes represented the staging of a radical dis-identification, away from the imposed ‘norms’ of the existing order. In the more conceptual formulation of Keith Bassett (2014, 887), it was about “the emergence of a new subject name different from any already identified part of that order.” It was also an act of *détournement* of Taksim Square space, “subversion of the ‘normal distribution’ of police spaces (between circulation, commerce and public functions)” (Bassett 2014, 893). The park itself became the material for detourning; the trees, streets, facades, street signs, bus stops, became a possibility to play with and produce new meanings; even human bodies and actions, such as that of the Standing Man, produced new meanings from very ordinary actions like standing still.

The re-figuring of the urban space around Taksim Square—that is to say, in Jacques Rancière’s terms (2010, 37), the redefinition of “what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it”—amounted to the creation of a space for the appearance of a transformed and reinvigorated subject, or, better, subjects. As Eylem Can (2014, 41) has remarked, the Gezi occupiers “initiated a fissure... a light poured in.” A change in the experience of subjectivity? What does it mean? “We started talking,” Can goes on, “talking in our own names, and with our own language. We turned the saying ‘the story that’s been told is your story’ into ‘it’s our story that we’re telling’. We started writing our poems in the streets.”

The AKP government’s desire to transform the entire Taksim Square by ‘resurrecting’ a long- demolished Ottoman garrison building—as an expression of its cultural politics of revanchism—was halted in this instance, in 2013. The neoliberal corporatist logic, which was seeking to bring into existence a shopping mall inside a historical-looking (*sic*) pastiche building could not prevail. But, of course, that guarantees nothing in the longer term. Already, by the time of writing this chapter, the ‘police’ initiative and offensive is being vigorously and vengefully renewed. In 2016, there was a new announcement from the government that the AKM building will be demolished, and a new opera house built in its place, “in line with the transformation that has been rolled out in Taksim.”



It is at our peril that we underestimate the force of the hatred of democracy. Let us bear in mind the conclusion drawn by Jacques Rancière (2006, 97):

Democracy “is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts. This can provoke fear, and so hatred, among those who are used to exercising the magisterium of thought. But among those who know how to share with anybody and everybody the equal power of intelligence, it can conversely inspire courage, and hence joy.”

## NOTES

1. In the 2013 İstanbul Art Biennale, one of the most powerfully evocative exhibits was by Ayşe Erkmen, titled “Kütüküt”. It was a wrecking ball hanging from a mobile crane, and brought to the entrance of the Biennale.
2. In fact, the programme announced the construction of “two new cities”: one on the European side, which has been subsequently been publicised through promotional images and architectural drawings; the second announced to be on the Anatolian side of the city, but with no specific indications as to its precise location.
3. As the occupation of the Gezi Park continued, the Solidarity platform—*Taksim Dayanışması*—which was formed at the outset of the announcement of government plans over the park, attended talks with government spokesman and then with the Prime Minister Erdoğan demanding the cancellation of the military barracks Project, of the AKM Project, and also the halting of use of plastic bullets and pepper gas against the demonstrators and lifting of restrictions against public demonstrations.

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