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A Few Remarks on the Lessons of Gezi Uprising

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Much has been already written on the recent uprising in Turkey that started as an environmentalist protest against the development plans at Taksim's Gezi Park in Istanbul on the 31st of May, and much more is yet to be written. The international media coverage has been so far focused on the state violence, and the public resistance to it. This is understandable, given the urgency of the situation which requires the support of the international community in the face of continuing police brutality, home raids, and massive arrests of protestors, journalists, doctors and lawyers, not to mention a threatened and silenced domestic media set against a pro-government media fabricating provocative stories.

The nature of the uprising, its specificities owing to the position of Turkey between the East and the West, and its relation to similar movements across the globe remain to be discussed in detail. Cultural critics and philosophers from around the world have already begun to express their views on the significance and impact of Gezi, and my aim, as an insider, is to contribute a few remarks in the hope of broadening the scope of those discussions.

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The protests in Turkey did not and do not deliberately aim at toppling the government; nor was it chiefly economically-motivated as is the case with other protests going on in Europe and Brazil. The government in Turkey knows that much; they are also aware, however, that every single citizen has their own reason(s) to cry, “Enough is enough!” Ordinary people from all walks of life, beliefs, political opinions, and sexual orientation have joined in this unique act of defiance against an absolutist power that does not know where to stop in its usurpation of basic rights and its interference with the most private spheres of human life. Just imagine a prime minister who is on TV almost 24/7 and who preaches to people to “go and consume alcohol at home,” to “have at least three children per couple,” to “ban their children from attending rock concerts,” to “raise pious and well-behaving children,” “to eat this kind of bread and not that.” Imagine again, he and his colleagues giving orders to ban or censor popular TV soaps and films on moral and religious grounds, interfering with the repertory of public theatres and voicing their plans to stop funding arts like opera and ballet. Add to that picture the greedy privatization of public property, the ruthless gentrification that has left tens of thousands homeless and jobless, the destruction of nature and of historical and cultural heritage, the no-guarantee-no-rights working conditions for the educated and the uneducated alike, the death-toll of workers at shipyards and power plants, the daily violence against women. The picture is not complete without the bottled-up resentment of people deliberately set against one another in terms of ethnicity, and religious sect, and even in terms of the football teams they support. No organised opposition would be strong enough to bring together this diversity; a point the government had been counting on. However, that is exactly why they were taken by surprise, and were initially sure that a minor protest by a few “chapullers” would be silenced before anyone else knew of it. Unfortunately for them, this time the news spread quickly, and the initial state violence displayed at the heart of Turkey’s largest city became, according to a recent poll, the chief reason (nearly 100%) for the great

number of people joining in the demonstrations, and risking their lives for a cause for which they would not have cared much previously. Luckily then, the resistance had not been not planned ahead, did not have a political leadership, and was not aimed at anything but “to be able to continue to breathe,” as one protestor put it.

Gezi Park has now been evacuated in the name of public security, although the public is not allowed to enter. Police officers can be seen, instead, strolling in the park, enjoying, perhaps, the cool shade of the trees they were determined to destroy a couple of weeks ago. Yet, no police presence, and no restoration work will be able to erase the traces of the experience shared by thousands of Gezi occupiers, albeit briefly, before its violent ending. I believe it is that experience that constitutes the ground for one of the far-reaching implications of “the event” as it has demonstrated the possibility of a different way of life, of true democracy, and of freedom to the one imposed by the establishment: The people who set camp at Gezi Park created a microcosm of a society in which the peaceful co-existence of differences of all types was maintained. As the nation-wide protests pulled in a vast array of grievances and were met with brutal government response, the Gezi Park community, including environmentalists, feminists, gays, lesbians and transsexuals, socialists, anti-capitalist and revolutionary Muslims among many others, went ahead with their self-organized life, based on the very basic humane principles of empathy, respect and dialogue before the final crackdown on June 16. They cooked and shared food, cared for homeless children, treated the sick and the injured, set up make-shift libraries, TV stations and performance venues. Concerts were held, prayers were offered, the dead were commemorated, and people danced and talked; all this was carried out in peace, and no one was offended. However brief its presence, it was this utopian community which posed the real threat to the establishment, which explains why the government “lost its temper” and destroyed the camp violently, at the risk of spreading the

uprising all over the country. After all, following in the footsteps of decades of authoritarian rulers, the current rulers must have considered it easier to deal with more familiar types of demonstrations, marches, and strikes.

They could not have been more wrong: The protests are now everywhere, in a myriad of forms in every city and town. They are as sporadic and unpredictable as were the demonstrations in support of Gezi occupation in Istanbul, wherein Istanbulites invented ingenious strategies to fight back and keep the police away from the park. Their slogan “Taksim is everywhere, resistance everywhere” is echoed in many streets and squares across the nation. More importantly, the experience inside the park has now inspired a number of evening forums with people gathering regularly at local parks to discuss politics, and the topics range from seemingly minor local problems to the political path to be followed in the future. People seem to have learned the hard way; the solidarity between groups that had been so far set against one another has led to the understanding that we need to not only hear, but listen to each other and resist isolation. In the same manner, another lesson Gezi has taught is that political actions against any kind of injustice must be owned by all; there are signs already which indicate that people are willing to be pro-active in matters that do not directly touch their own private lives or the interests of the cultural, professional, sexual, etc., categories to which they belong.

To the surprise of many, there seems to be no end to the creativity unleashed by the event. When, immediately following the crackdown, a performance artist was heard to be standing still in the middle of the adjacent Taksim square, he was instantly joined by tens of others, and his one-man performance inspired similar stand-still protests nation-wide. In the earlier days of the protests, one young man was asked why he had participated in the uprising. His

televised response was arguably the inspiration for this artist's piece: "I am no writer, I am no artist. I do not have the tools they do to voice my emotions; the only thing I have is my body, and I am here in my body." The way Erdem Gündüz made use of his body as the sole material for his performance was a response to the way the embedded media persistently ignored the government's treatment of human beings as disposable bodies in the uprising during which people lost their lives, eyes, and ended up with broken limbs, to say the least. Significant not only because it underlined the dignity of the "body" of the popular movement, but the new wave of protests inspired by this performance more than blurred the line between art and life, and made artists of "common" people in an act of defiance against the policies of a government which has for years tried hard to alienate and marginalise art and artists. In the words of a renowned caricaturist, "the whole nation was marching, and the first award went to the standing man!" (Metin Üstündağ).

A similar point can be made for the explosion of humour as the most spontaneous response to government policies and police brutality. It is unprecedented in scope and creativity, brilliantly intertextual in its deployment of common language, poetry, slogans, and official discourse, and most annoying from the perspective of authority. Poetry and satire have always been the strength of Turkish language, yet this new language of resistance emerging from the streets – "poetry in the streets" reads one graffiti – seems to have rendered redundant the traditional forms of political humour. Much may be lost in translation, but this subversive language will certainly contribute to the invention of new political forms of opposition when translated into the languages of the world.

What is next? Nobody knows. The government is likely to pursue its repressive and reactionary practices. The popular revolt might face even more brutal state violence. The near

future of the country might be darker than ever. Yet, what gives Gezi its historical significance is the leap it has caused in the way a great majority of people think about themselves and their part in the creation of a better world. The impact of this mental leap is yet to be seen, hopefully not only in Turkey but across the globe. The Gezi resistance, which has, with the innovative means of struggle and solidarity it has produced, turned Turkey into “the ideal place for a great historical and political innovation to occur,” is already a major historical moment in “the creation of a new source of future politics.” As we say here, “Once the “djinn” comes out of the bottle, it cannot go back in.”