

# Gezi Resistance in Istanbul: Something in Between Tahrir, Occupy and a Late Turkish 1968

*Süreyyya Evren*

It started with a small group of activists trying to defend a public park against government's plans to build a huge shopping mall. In few days, as police used increasing violence against that tiny cluster of protestors, more and more people came to show their support. On 31 May, the whole country woke up at 3 a.m. to find that a small protest had turned into a huge revolutionary moment. Taksim Square and Gezi Park (in central Istanbul) were 'captured' on 1 June and remained government-free zones for two weeks ... It was a bit ethereal for everyone: a stateless mega city-centre! The Taksim Commune! And anarchists were clearly not the only people who enjoyed the temporary autonomous zone. The heterogeneous movement was politicised through a common process. Different political stances converged for the first time. There was clearly a 'multitude' on the streets during the uprising and this multitude is still active in different forms. What happened, how did it develop? I believe that the events repay discussion.

There are aspects of Gezi resistance that are truly local and you need to understand the Turkish political and social background to be able to connect fully to the events. On the other hand there are so many similarities, even links with other international uprisings and movements, that the protest seems very familiar. I would like to suggest placing the Gezi resistance in the context of the 2011-2013 uprisings, that is, the new wave of resistance that has emerged in the aftermath of the anti-globalisation movement (whatever we call it). Many aspects of 2011-2013 events resonate with the Zapatistas in 1990s. The *encuentros* in Chiapas and the writings of Marcos make sense of what is happening in Turkey. For me, this as a new web of radicalism and the main outcome is not overtly 'political'; rather, it is about the empowerment of people. Gezi has transformed Turkish people.

As to the details: the festival-like atmosphere of Taksim after the police withdrew was very interesting. The square was full of revolutionary groups and parties. But none were able to control the festival, so to speak. In a typical May Day celebration in Turkey, for example the one I witnessed on 1 May 2012, (which was also held in the Taksim Square), there was one main programme, one focus; it was a very good plan and it involved a lot of security. Huge flags, huge placards, all displaying the glory of the revolutionary parties. It was a grandiose show. The 31 May uprising and the June TAZ in Taksim was instead based on 'affect' rather than flamboyance. There was room for everyone's creativity. People made jokes everywhere: on the walls, on upturned police vehicles, on signs; there were performances in every corner of the square, not all by artists but some by activists, even some by passers-by. Some helped to design a park library. People used a police car to make a wish tree, like Yoko Ono's Wish Trees.<sup>1</sup> There were live concerts in various parts of the square, different types of music. Some groups marched and chanted, others worked on an indie radio station, organised painting workshops for children, or just shouted against the government ... The Gezi Resistance included apolitical youth, precarious employees, workers, activists, anarchists, Marxists, Kemalists, teachers, lawyers, doctors and most importantly many artists. This movement was initiated by a new generation of young activists but their mothers supported them too, conquering bread: giving food, helping youngsters to protect themselves against police brutality. For many it was the first political action they had taken part in. After the government inflicted a series of oppressive actions designed to transform Turkey into an Islamic authoritarian regime, people reacted.

The Gezi Resistance was an internet-based uprising, a Twitter revolution if you like. Facebook, Twitter and other internet environments were *de facto* places of the resistance. The anarchistic organisational principles of the original activists in Gezi Park subordinated ideology to practical action and attracted thousands of people who have never been involved in a demonstration before and who wanted to help the activists. The internet helped many people from all walks to step out.

Gezi Resistance resulted in clashes with police in several areas of Istanbul. In most cases, protestors didn't even throw stones. Usually, their 'crime' was to return stubbornly having been attacked with pepper, gas and water cannons, to face down the police once more. People regrouped after all kinds of attacks and those chased by police found themselves in narrow streets, without places to hide. Twitter campaigns started asking residents in areas of police pursuit to open their doors and give the protesters access to the internet to upload images of police violence. Keys and passwords, things we associated with private protection created collective bonds, bonds

that didn't exist before. One piece of graffiti, written under heavy police attack, illustrated this perfectly: 'THAT'S ENOUGH, IF YOU CONTINUE LIKE THIS I'M GOING TO CALL THE POLICE!'

One question preoccupied the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan: How should my citizens live? Erdoğan's troubling answer was to interfere with the daily lives of citizens – repeatedly in favour of an Islamic way of life. Bans on drinking alcohol were followed by advice not to eat white bread and for women to have at least three children. He came out against abortion. The Minister of Health talked about banning abortion even in cases of rape. The threats encouraged a campaign of civil disobedience by Turkish women. The slogan 'My Body My Decision' appeared on women's bodies, photographed and published online.<sup>2</sup> Women played a huge role in the resistance: on the barricades, behind the barricades, in Gezi Park, banging pots and pans in Istanbul and in other cities, in Twitter campaigns. This was a response to the oppressions experienced in their daily lives. 'My body my decision' evolved into 'my park my decision' and even: 'my country my decision'.

Gezi Resistance fits Emma Goldman's description of a revolution that you can dance to. There was always someone dancing in Taksim and Gezi. It was also the first completely grassroots Turkish social movement. There are no leaders, no parties dominating the movement. No initiators. This distinguished it from all previous revolutionary moments. It was a surprise for everyone involved: we never saw ourselves like this, rioting without a plan, without a programme, without a leader, and trying to create a new life afterwards; testing our limits from a small park. Anarchistic movements have always included numerous encounters and flows of ideas and people. And because there is no one centre, these connections play an important role for all participants in shaping a common politics. There is no single starting-point, no point of origin for the Gezi Resistance. It has no birth certificate, no figuration. It has no end. Always in the middle. Always on the network. And that creates a very fruitful platform for all kinds of creativity.

The 'Turkish Summer' began on 27 May 2013 when attempts to bulldoze the Gezi Park were stopped by few activists in the middle of the night. Those environmentalists wanted to stop a shopping mall being put up in the place of this nice, small park in Taksim. In few days the number of protestors grew in parallel with the escalation of police brutality against environmentalists. On 31 May, the police kicked the activists out of the park. That sparked an unforeseen public reaction. People organised through social media platforms. Protests began immediately. Protests attracted tens of thousands of people to the streets. And despite harsh policing, people refused to go back home. Demonstrations continued all

night, in both the Asian and the Anatolian side of Istanbul. The next day, on 1 June 2013, the number of protestors grew and protests were seen in other cities as well. At some point in the afternoon, police left the area to the protestors. People immediately built barricades on main roads. As a result, for the first time in its history, Gezi Park, Taksim Square and Istiklal Avenue became state-free locations governed by the people and the people only. There were of course plainclothes officers but nobody in uniforms. Soon it was possible to get free food and clothes, thanks to donations and more than a thousand volunteers. Infirmaries, a new garden, workshops and a library also appeared. Different political groups occupied different parts of the park; also lots of young students without any political affiliation occupied the space. It was such a shock for the citizens of Istanbul. In the night time, Gezi Park and Taksim Square became festival areas with various concerts and shows.

A direct reference to the flow of the system could again be found in art, in an earlier performance of the Turkish artistic group HaZaVuZu. Their performance *Cut the Flow* (2007) was a parody of how police forces regulate human flows on Istiklal Avenue in Istanbul, one of the main pedestrian streets in the city. As a group, they were first unnoticed as a part of the human flow on the street, but suddenly they created a 'human barrage', a gesture of cutting the flow. Reclaim the Streets, one of the well-known groups of the anti-globalisation movement, has also been known for stopping flows. Interventions to flows do not aim to stop the flow right away, but to show its ideological rhythm. And of course, also to make us feel that we can 'reclaim' our control over it. HaZaVuZu's performance was a pioneering work in this sense, because all Gezi resistance demonstrations were about reclaiming our control over the flow: over the flow of people, ourselves in our cities and our parks, over the flow of money that motivates the state to exchange a park with a shopping mall, and over the flow of information, which is heavily monitored by the government.

**Süreyyya Evren** writes on anarchism, contemporary art, and literature. He has published several books in Turkish including *Anarşizmler*, *Anarşizmin Geçmişi ve Tarihleri* (2013) and several articles in English and German. He is the editor and founder of the post-anarchist magazine *Siyahi* (Istanbul 2004-2006). Together with Duane Rousselle, he edited the *Post-Anarchism Reader* (Pluto, 2011) and founded the post-anarchist journal *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*.

## NOTES

1. See <http://imaginepeacetower.com/yoko-onos-wish-trees> Accessed: 11 June 2013.
2. For a video on My Body My Decision protests see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXmzLT7XVCQ&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXmzLT7XVCQ&feature=player_embedded)