

#direngeziparkı #direndemokrasi (#resistforgezipark #resistfordemocracy)



A protester with a medical mask against tear gas

Photo: Ekmel Ertan

I had thought that those who characterized the Tahrir square uprising in Egypt as facebook revolution were neglecting the primary dynamics of the event in favour of new media. I am in the field of new media and the conferences I have attended always looked at the subject from this angle and foregrounded the role of social media. Facebook graffiti on the streets of Cairo was noteworthy. Social media had an undeniable role in all this but I thought that the “*facebook revolution*” characterization was a kind of branding, a new form of orientalism.

Last week I changed my mind. I certainly cannot call what happened in Turkey as a facebook revolution but I have experienced how important and defining facebook and social media in general can be. Facebook graffiti in Cairo streets were in fact a tactic to try to draw people to social media. Tahrir square was the first social movement of this size where the effect of social media became so apparent.

In Istanbul nobody wrote facebook or twitter on walls. This was because these are ordinary and everyday communication tools for the youth on the streets. Everyone was aware. This is why social media was intensively used from the very beginning. Nobody will call what happened in Istanbul a facebook revolution because that first wave has already been overcome in Egypt. However, I feel obliged to say, if social media wasn't there, we may well woken up to much darker mornings. The uprising would have been taken care of in a couple of days

with excessive police violence, and the pain of injustice would have been planted in the bad memories of those hopeless souls who know what happened, and who are ostracized precisely because of this knowledge.



Ataturk Cultural Centre (home of the State Opera and Ballet and State Theatre covered by flags by protester groups. AKM has been closed for the last 8 years for renovation, which never properly started.

Photo: Ekmal Ertan

The events that led to the current revolt started with an opposition to the government's decision to reconstruct in the middle of a city park a 18th military barracks that was themselves demolished in 1940 by the recommendation of Henri Prost, the French planner who was reworking Istanbul's master plan at the time. The proposed new military barracks was in fact a shopping center. Given the fact that Istanbul's biggest need is public places and parks **(1)**, the transformation into a shopping center of what is at hand as such was an unacceptable idea to Istanbulites, especially given that the park in question is in the city center where this need is direst. Further, the Taksim square bears the political memory of the republic. Besides a dominant representation of the republic, it also provides a public space of expression to those socially politically marginalized or otherized in one way or another. As such, it is the most visible and most public urban place.

The Taksim Pedestrianization Project that includes the reconstruction of the Artillery Barracks was announced by the Istanbul Municipality in 2011 **(2)**. The Istanbul' Chambers of Architects and of urban planners legally challenged the decision and, as the attempts to destroy the park became actual, Taksim Solidarity was formed and the latter's volunteers started to stand watch at the park. In the meantime, despite the ongoing talks between a number of state agencies and civil society representatives, experts' reports and court decisions to

halt the construction, PM Erdogan continued to announce the construction of the barracks adamantly and incomprehensibly. On this very day he shows his incompetence in democracy by continuing to repeat the same line in a language that gets increasingly violent that terrifies the populace and attempts to literally divide it.



Protesters' tents in Gezi Park

Photo: Ekmel Ertan

On May 27 as it became public that a wall of the park was torn down to let the construction machines in, a group of 50 voluntary activists from the solidarity came to the park and started to stand watch. The group spent the night at the park. Next morning, around 5AM construction machinery went into the park accompanied by the police. The news of this event went out that morning and rapidly spread via social media and awakened a large majority. As Süreyya Sıtkı Önder, an MP came to the site and stopped the demolition by standing in front of a construction machine, the event took on a different dimension, the news spread even more and a reaction started to form. Next morning, as the police repeated themselves and set the tents of some protesters on fire, very different groups all living in Istanbul all reacted with the same sensibility and decisiveness. Football fans organized, led by the infamous Çarşı (Bazaar) team of the club Beşiktaş. The next day Çarşı marched to Taksim; Fenerbahçe fans declared that they support Çarşı and departed for Taksim. Galatasaray fans joined in. Many sectors of the populace shared the sentiment. A crowd of a few thousands that took off from Kadıköy, crossed the Bosphorus bridge and arrived in Taksim. Un unbelievable crowd was pouring into Taksim from all over Istanbul. The violence of the police escalated. Barricades were set up on the major arteries leading to Taksim and protesters clashed with the police **(3)**. The clashes which lasted until June 1 took the form of officers directly firing at people with tear gas canisters and the crowd pulling back to defend the barricades. Meanwhile the revolt became even more widespread in Istanbul as the police prevented people from other neighbourhoods

from coming to Taksim and they supported the protest in their neighbourhood. Other cities joined in the protests. The clashes intensified as people poured in the streets and the police attacked them with tear gas (4).



Protesters in the park

Photo: Ekmel Ertan

It all started out with the uprooting of a tree and escalated with the unacceptable violence of the police but such a local incident would not have been enough to make cities such as Adana and Rize rise up. The causes were closely related to a number of facts that have been accumulating. In the last two years the number of political detainees had surpassed those of China and Iran; Turkey was also the world champion in the number of arrested journalists; Administratively, the people were not consulted in decisions that concerned them leading to a systematic digression from democratic principles; the judicial system was instrumentalized for political ends and the prime minister increasingly behaved as a tyrant, an a priori sultan who intervened in the everyday life of the citizens. Erdogan had managed to bring to an end the almost 40 years old Turkish-Kurdish conflict to an end but the oppressive and othering discourse he employed in this case constituted a stark contrast.

Since May 27 when the revolt began until the last few days mainstream media outlets failed to report on the event, they ignored them. This was a clear breach of people's right to receive accurate information. As Taksim, the heart of the social memory of Turkey was heavily bombed with tear gas, Haber Turk channel chose to broadcast a documentary on penguins and NTV went for recorded old speeches of the prime minister. In other channels continued with their usual sitcoms. The only dissenting channel Halk TV (People's TV) tried to support the revolt and report on the events with complete live coverage.

The crowd was multiplying as people continued to arrive in Taksim. Everyone has

become an insurgent. Nearly everyone was carrying some type of gas mask, a scarf, a scuba mask, vicks, lemon and carbonated water in his or her bag.

In the early hours of June 1 the police was pushed out of Taksim and with the participation of various groups, Gezi Park became the center of the resistance featuring a multi-layered social life in which cooperation and solidarity reigned. Tens of thousands of people have been in Gezi Park since June 1. The streets that were formed in the park were named after the people who died on the streets. A library was opened and a vegetable garden planted. TV and radio broadcast began. A sick bay, kitchen and clothing exchange service has been responding to the needs of the protesters. Never before such a collective life has been practiced in Turkey. Never before in the history of the Turkish republic such a heterogenous group has exhibited such a homogenous behaviour. The Turkish youth born after the 1980 and always branded as apolitical surprised everyone by displaying an unexpected level of resistance and cooperation.

In the meantime, the prime minister went on a trip to North Africa as if nothing had happened. He faced small problems such as cancellations of appointments by democratic institutions and came back with an honorary doctorate he received in Morocco. The night he returned, thousands of *"men"*, called in via sms (5) by the AKP Istanbul local municipalities were taken to the airport by bus. For the first time, the subway worked until 4 AM for the same crowd to come back. The same subway had been shut down to prevent the people from coming to Taksim square on May 1. This supposedly spontaneous but highly organized gathering (*"we weren't expecting it"*, *"we didn't know"*) was presented as the reaction of the people to the Gezi resistance. The prime minister responded to it with an agitated and poetry-ridden speech that is full of hatred, and occasioned a rather shameful and tragic moment for the country. The crowd chanted *"open the way and we'll crash Taksim"*. Predictably, the PM likened the actions of the protesters (the overturning and destruction of police and media vehicles in the square, the use of a few destroyed buses as barricades against the police, the graffiti and writing on the walls etc.) to a terrorist action and characterized the protesters as looters, a group of marginal punks. As a result of his efforts, the *"çapulcu"* (looter) was universalized and even an intellectual dignitary such as Noam Chomsky said *"I am a çapulcu as well"*.



Protest in Taksim Square

Photo: Ekmel Ertan

Towards the end of his speech, the PM said that he wishes a computer literate youth that carry one in their person. That youth was already at Gezi Park. This showed that the PM and his government did not understand at all the world of computers and information, communication technologies and their inner-ideologies. The exclusively male crowd who went to the airport to greet the PM were called there via SMS and transported by bus. SMS is a unidirectional form of communication. The message arrives at a particular address and directly targets the receiver who will read it. This is very different from being in a network. It is in fact not-being in a network. It is not voluntary. If you are not in the network, someone has to arrange a bus for you to get from one place to another!

Such a popular act could not have been imagined in the 1980s. Turkey is now enjoying a freedom, the slowly developing democracy. The continuation of this protest in Taksim square shows that we have made progress in a lot of issues. Turkey has changed a lot and Gezi is an expression of this change. On the other hand, another source of hope for the resistance is its humor and art. There has never been a resistance action that is as humorous. Resistance means struggle, this resistance is carried out by a youth who can grasp the whole picture and thus puts everything into comical use, the youth whom we have a habit of calling apolitical in this country. It is a good thing their parents kept them away from politics out of the fear of their own past experiences, a good thing that they did not receive that knowledge. Our perception of their apolitical nature stems from the fact that their language and discourses are completely different from our habitual forms **(6)**. This movement is undoubtedly political and it proposes an entirely new political practice. This humor proposes and reproduces a perception of the graffiti written on the walls during the Gezi resistance, the jokes circulating in the social media, Çarşı fan group's takeover of a construction machine and chasing police vehicles not as a picture of war but an element of comedy. This is a

sign of a serious position taking and awareness, a sign of new political practice.

There is a visible orientation towards direct democracy in the world as indicated by the Arab Spring, Occupy movement and what is happening in Turkey. This is a direct and political movement but it cannot be understood with the traditional models. This is an act of direct democracy. It is not a coincidence that movements that bear similarities appeared one after the other in the last few years. Communication technologies and digital reality constitute the cultural and ideological background of these movements. Politics has fallen behind society in Turkey and the World. Hierarchical political models built on power balances, interest-based relationships and secrecy are incapable of understanding and responding to the events in a manner suitable with the speed of the times. Politics still responds to the people with its old reflexes because it cannot figure out the networked structure of the new world and still thinks that the most authoritative, the most knowledgeable is the one on top of the political hierarchy; it still wishes to think the governing and the governed as separate entities. It presumes that it can control social segments and groups by othering them; it does not want to be plural and equal. It cannot give up the binary conception of the world.



Taxi drivers' free service for the emergency cases in Taksim
Photo: Ekmel Ertan

In a world where physical as well as -and especially- electronic communication is so common, where everyone can have access to information, where everyone can build their network via intercultural, sub-cultural, interclass relationships and where these networks are interlaced no one is just governed. Everyone knows that they are a nod that connects and makes meaningful the whole of humanity. Such an integrative stance and perception carries within it the knowledge that it does not belong to Turkey, or any particular region or country. Those people who follow the Gezi Park resistance via online media share the same concerns and know that they too had experienced the same thing during the Occupy Zucotti

Park. There is no longer a localized and cornered group of people facing the sovereign. In fact, the latter has to deal with a complex and infinite network and do not yet possess the reflexes to deal with it. It was thanks to this absence that Taksim was occupied and re-socialized. Because it is impossible to develop a reflex against this network, Taksim, Zuchotti and others will always remain public places. One can only understand this network by participating in it and internalizing it; this is very different from developing a reflex as one transforms and changes with the network. The power of the future will be that of the ones who accept to become nodes in the network, that is those who develop the ability to govern without a government and without power.

Being linked to a network is to know that one is part of the whole. It is to be able to see the whole picture and be open to influences. This is why these movements show similar characteristics. The fact that there is a library and a vegetable garden at Gezi Park is a consequence of being wired in a network. The communication of so many people from different groups, sub-cultures, economic or social classes is only possible via network culture, communication and being in a network.

The government carries on the same illiteracy and lack of perception. Gezi Park resistance goes on. The reflexes of the network are complex. Nobody knows what is going to happen. But we know that good things are going to happen, that we are intelligent and creative enough to develop good things, and we think better together.

Edited and translated to English by Nafiz Akşehirlioglu

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Notes

1. The ratio of parks and green spaces in Istanbul to the surface area of the city is 1.5%. This ratio is 14% in Berlin, 38.4% in London and 14% in New York (World Cities Culture Report 2012)
2. For detailed chronological information on this topic http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Taksim_Gezi_Park%C4%B1_protestolar%C4%B1
3. For a chronology of the events from the very beginning in

English <http://whatshappeningintaksim.com/homepage>

4. To get an idea about the police violence <http://delilimvar.tumblr.com/>
5. When I say that SMS is unidirectional, I wish to emphasize that one is subjected to it. The communication in this example is one way, nobody replied to those sms, nobody engaged in a dialogue. The order of the authority had come via an SMS, they were subjected and they either consented or not. I am speaking of one-sidedness in this sense and not in a technical sense. But this situation is very different from joining twitter and acquiring information voluntarily.
6. This situation is visible in the resistance area that effectively consists of two spaces. Taksim square and Gezi Park are application grounds of thses two different practices. Whereas those who are a continuation of the leftist traditon gather in the square and make themselves visible with slogans and flags, the representatives of the new practice at Gezi open a library, plant a garden, perform theatre, recharge their phones using sunlight and paint with children.

About the author:

Ekmel Ertan, Artistic Director at amberPlatform/BIS, Lecturer at Sabancı University

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