

SEXUALITY, PUBLIC SPACE, AND RESISTANCE

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INTRODUCTION

On May 27, 2013 at 11:30 pm. bulldozers drove into Gezi, a central park in Taksim, İstanbul, to uproot five trees in preparation for future construction. Within a couple of hours, a group of 20-30 people came to the park to stop the work, and decided to sit-in to keep guard. (Figure 1) As members of related NGO's, they had long been active to stop the Taksim renewal plans that had been announced by the Prime Minister two years ago. The small scale sit-in at the site marked the beginning of a significant social movement, hitherto known as the Gezi movement. Within a few days, as the number of occupants who pitched tents at the park increased to hundreds, the local protest turned into a nationwide movement with global repercussions.

Besides the Taksim renewal plans, the protesters raised their voices against the authoritarian policies of the Prime Minister and his Islamist government, who countered the protests with severe police intervention. Within a month, six people lost their lives; hundreds were injured by batons, tear gas and water cannons; and many were arrested all over the country. Gezi Park protests are open to interpretation and analysis at many levels ranging from economics and politics to cultural and social issues. Here I focus on the articulation of space, discourse and subjectivity by looking at specific instances of the movement where spaces and spatial practices have been explicitly sexualized and binary pairs of woman/man and private/public have been deterritorialized.¹



*Figure 1. Aerial view of Gezi Park and Taksim Area, İstanbul
Source: Google Earth*

SPATIALIZING SEXUALITY

During the Gezi movement, specific spatial practices were developed in different cities, which reclaimed the space of the state via unprecedented tactics. The difference between spaces of the state apparatus characterized by hierarchy and fixity and nomadic spaces characterized by change and fluidity are theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who distinguish between the striated space of the state and the smooth space of the nomad.² Three instances at the Gezi movement are exemplary in manifesting the striating and smoothing operations in urban space. The first two involve the private spaces of domesticity, the last one concerns the public space of a monumental mosque.

First of all it needs to be clarified that, despite the passive resistance of the protesters, police violence had been an everyday event throughout the Gezi Resistance. The occupiers of the park were joined by people from other neighbourhoods who gathered at Taksim square every evening to support the movement. This became such a routine act that special police vehicles equipped with tear gas and water cannons were kept on guard at strategic posts, ready to take action when the crowd grew to a seemingly critical size. Upon police intervention, protesters dispersed to side streets, trying to escape the powerful spray of water, the burning effects of the gas, and liberally used police batons. Many were injured, rendered helpless and in need of immediate help.

Such help came unexpectedly from residential blocks lining up the labyrinthian side streets which served as escape routes. Neighbourhood residents generously stocked their apartment entrances with water, food, and medical emergency equipment to reduce the effects of tear gas on the eyes and the body. Soon an unwritten contract was established between the residents and the protesters, whereby the latter knew where to get emergency relief when required. This marked a remarkable instance when the domestic interior which is associated with the nurturing qualities of the maternal realm, creatively intersected with and supported the public space of political action.

Critical scholarship has long pointed to the historical association of masculinity with the public space of action, violence and warfare and femininity with the inactive sphere of domesticity.³ Indeed, continual exertion of police violence on the passive resistance of Gezi protesters has been an embarrassingly obvious manifestation of masculinity that dominates the public sphere under the guise of social order. Yet, as I argue below, the conventional role of the maternal-feminine principle was radically reversed during the movement.

On June 11, the Governor of İstanbul stated that the innocence of the early stages of the protests was replaced by life threatening acts by marginal groups and made the following call: ‘We are concerned about our children in Gezi Park, which has turned into a fire zone. I plead our precious children, and especially their families to persuade them to leave the area.’ In doing so he clearly called for the reterritorialization of the home as the safe haven of domesticity and security, as opposed to the public milieu of war and violence.

Mothers of the protesters responded to this conservative call two days later, by organizing to go to the park, not to take their children back home but to support their cause. Holding hands, they formed a circle around the park, chanting ‘everywhere is mother[hood], everywhere is resistance.’ Hence, rather than denying their maternal function as home makers, they literally formed a wall with their

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bodies to house their children at the very site of resistance. In doing so, they powerfully displaced the association of motherhood with conventional conceptions of domesticity and deterritorialized the notion of home.

Such practices of deterritorialization have been an unmistakable part of the Gezi movement, manifested not only in streets, parks and squares, but also in private residences. During the first weeks of the event, at exactly 9:00 pm, protesting neighbourhoods in many cities saw flickering lights behind open apartment windows and residents stepping out to their balconies, holding pots and pans in their hands. Within a few minutes, flickering lights were foregrounded by the rhythmical pounds of kitchen equipment. Thus, pots and pans, associated with bodily functions of eating and drinking, women, and domesticity, were taken out from kitchen cupboards to the masculine space of political protest. The act was joyously carried out for exactly fifteen minutes, as quiet neighborhoods turned into spectacles of light and sound and new neighborly relations were established based on political alliance.

The intersection of the public and the private and the intrusion of the feminine into the public sphere was manifested in a somewhat different manner in the final instance, which involves a monumental mosque, on the escape route of the protesters in Taksim. On May 30, following extremely brutal police intervention, helpless protesters escaped inside the mosque. Joined shortly by volunteering health care workers, the crowd turned the prayer hall into a medical center, where the injured were laid on the carpeted floor and provided with emergency care. Two days later, the event was broadcasted as a scandal by newspapers which reported unacceptable and immoral behaviour in the mosque, including alcohol consumption, smoking and wearing shoes in the holy space. Although these claims were contradicted by the mosque official on duty during the events, the discourse of blame perpetuated in speeches by the Prime Minister and his fellow governmental officials.⁴

Interestingly, only a few days before the mosque events, the Prime Minister had related alcohol, morality and sex in the context of proper behavior in subway cars. Apparently the subway administration had installed public broadcasts in the cars, which warned against immoral behaviour regarding public display of intimacy between sexes. To counter criticisms against the propriety of such announcements, the Prime Minister explained that ‘there are moral codes of behaviour in the State Subway System. What is wrong with broadcasting warnings if these are abridged? Then a group comes in with alcohol and similar stuff. Now I ask, would a mother and father want their daughter to sit on somebody’s lap?’⁵ He went on to say that personally he would have no respect for women and men who sat side by side on public seats.

During its use for emergency health care, the traditional order of the mosque space was radically transformed. First of all, unlike conventional prayer practices, men and women co-existed in the main hall to take care of the injured regardless of their gender. Womens’ heads were not covered and obviously there was no time to take shoes off. In short, a different spatial order was established, due to the requirements of an emergency state, which in essence did not contradict the religiosity of the space. Ironically, the striated male space of the prayer hall was transformed to include both genders who performed the feminine role of nurture and care.

As these instances show, new spatial practices emerged in the Gezi movement, which challenged and deterritorialized given spatial categories. The holy space of the mosque, the secular space of the hospital, the informal space of domesticity/home and the open space of public protest articulated with

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each other in unprecedented ways. Such articulations proved to be powerful tactics in countering and alleviating the effects of pain caused by brutal acts of governmental intervention.

SEXUALIZING SPACE

Besides challenging given spatial vocabularies, the Gezi movement undermined popular significations of sexuality in a number of spectacular instances which incorporated performance, celebration and joy into political opposition. Some of these produced images that turned into icons of the movement, while others achieved ritualistic significance. Here I focus on three particular cases, which powerfully challenged the sexualized codes of their spatial settings. The first case involves the image of a woman, Ceyda Sungur, in Gezi Park, who was photographed on the first day of the events as the target of tear gas sprayed by a policeman standing in close proximity (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Woman in red dress, May 28, 2013, İstanbul

Source: <http://www.gazeteport.com.tr/i/n/137078196814474.jpg> Retrieved August 12, 2013

The striking image showed a young woman dressed in red, with her hair raised due to the pressure of the gas. Hitherto known as ‘the red-dressed woman,’ the image was widely publicized through the national and international media and gained iconic status. A life-size version was turned into a billboard where protesters could have their picture taken as they looked through the hole where her face is (Figure 3). The face of Ceyda Sungur was rendered imperceptible as others temporarily occupied the image of her body. But what does the body of a red-dressed woman signify?

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London: 01—03 April, 2014



Figure 3. Woman in red dress as banner, June 2013, İzmir

Source: <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25447981/> Retrieved July 25, 2013

In the popular imagery, red is a loaded color that is associated with female sexuality. Linked to the realm of *femme fatales*, sensuality and mystery, it signifies the dark side of familial propriety.⁶ In the context of Gezi resistance, the image of the red-dressed woman effectively deterritorialized such associations of popular culture by celebrating this sexualized image as a signifier of freedom and liberation. A red dressed woman as the target of a police-man signifies the violence of instrumental rationality, hierarchy and order against the sensual realm of pleasure and spontaneity. The celebration of the latter by the protesters is significant in showing the sexualized substructure of the protests. The second instance took place on June 17. Following police attacks on the protesters and the closure of Taksim subway exits for security reasons, an anonymous man in a white shirt and grey pants stood motionless at the main exit exit for eight hours (figure 4).



Figure 4. Standing man, June 17, 2013, İstanbul

Source: http://www.gazetea24.com/resim/taksimde-duran-adam_8043.html Retrieved July 20, 2013

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
London: 01—03 April, 2014

His staged performance was shortly joined by others, and the numbers of standing citizens increased to three hundred within a few hours. The collective performance ended when the police demanded the vacation of the area but its effect continued in the following days. Like the red-dressed woman images of ‘the standing man’ were internationally circulated in newspapers and social media and soon became one of the most powerful symbols in the visual repertoire of the protests. Later identified as performance artist Erdem Gündüz, the standing man avoided being in the limelight. Like the red-dressed woman, he claimed to be just anybody whose act can be replaced by anybody.⁷ This turned out to be the case indeed, as numerous other standing acts followed suit in other parts of the country.

Significantly, the name, standing man, was not changed despite numerous women joining standing groups. Although this may initially be perceived as yet another instance of universalizing the figure of man in the name of both sexes, the situation is more complicated in this context. If the public sphere is loaded with masculine attributes of warfare and action, standing in silence challenges conventional forms of public demonstrations that involve marching, giving speeches and chanting slogans. Seen in this light, the standing man figure is a brilliant act of subversion, whereby a male subject occupies public space creating a spectacular instance of passivity. Hence, I would argue that when women adopted the name of ‘standing men,’ their act needs to be associated with the feminized act of a male figure rather than a passive acceptance of maleness as a universal category.

My last instance of sexually charged political performativity involves a parade in Taksim, organized by the LGBT community who had been present from the beginning of the movement. On June 30, thousands, including non-LGBT subjects, participated in the parade, which turned out to be the most flamboyantly sexualized, carnival-like event. According to literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnival is a communal performance where all social hierarchies, norms of etiquette and decency are undermined and where the body takes central stage in a mood of celebration and laughter.⁸ Bakhtin sees the carnival as the outburst of an affirmative, emancipatory and creative force, akin to the role of deterritorialization in Deleuze and Guattari’s work.

On the day of the LGBT parade, Taksim square turned into a festive area decorated with rainbow flags, umbrellas and colorful banners (Figure 5). The participants, holding or chanting slogans of protest, were in a joyful mood, displaying a strong sense of community and mutual support. Some wore bright colored wigs and glittering outfits; some kissed or walked hand in hand with their loved ones; others generously displayed their tattoos and body painting or came cross-dressed. Language was also creatively and cleverly used throughout the parade as cheerfully chanted slogans adapted words and phrases that are traditionally associated with the LGBT community to the agenda of the Gezi movement. Examples include, ‘If morality is oppression and violence, we are immoral,’ ‘the world would shake if fags were free,’ ‘that kind of resistance,’ and ‘there is no revolution without sluts.’ The parade was a visual feat of embodiment and sexuality. Its carnivalesque style offered a utopian moment of abundance and freedom apparently rendering the authorities helpless with no justification for intervention.

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London: 01—03 April, 2014



Figure 5: LGBT parade, June 30, 2013, İstanbul

Source: <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/lgbtt/148086-onur-yuruyusu-nde-direnisin-o-bicimi>

Retrieved August 8, 2013

THE POWER OF CONTINGENCY

‘Nothing will ever be the same again’ is a phrase that is often used by the supporters of the Gezi movement. Indeed, the event marked a threshold in Turkey’s recent history at a number of levels. Politically, it marked a radical challenge to the hierarchically structured centralized governmental style of the ruling party. Psychologically, many claimed that the threshold of fear was crossed, as protesters continued their demonstrations despite intolerable police brutality. Socially, the so-called Y-generation, which formed the majority of the protesters, showed that they were not nearly as politically apathetic and ignorant as their highly politicized parents thought.⁹ Culturally, it was the first time in the recent history of protests when differences in gender, class and ethnicity were collectively affirmed, and strengthened the movement rather than fragmenting it.

From a gender perspective, the Gezi movement deterritorialized sexualized significations of space. Significantly, it did not pose the feminine against the masculine, but showed how articulations of different sexualities with different subjectivities can produce alternative and liberating spatial practices.

Besides attracting criticism against the authoritarian style of the government at an international scale, Gezi events resulted in the eventual admission of the representatives of the ruling party that they made strategic mistakes and crossed the limits of democratic governance.¹⁰ However, this does not mean that the Gezi Movement marked the end of the sedentary and striated spaces of state mechanisms. The popular slogan ‘nothing will ever be the same again’ needs to be understood as the celebration of their contingent nature. Gezi events surfaced the power of fluid articulations of sexuality and space which were mostly unprecedented, sometimes joyful and celebratory, but always in recognition of their own contingency. Once the recognition of contingency is celebrated as a possibility for change, joyful lines of flight are always in the horizon for productive trajectories of political action.

ENDNOTES

¹ . Deterritorialization is a term coined by contemporary philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), which signifies undoing established structures and decoding systems that organize our bodies, identities, and words. G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans., B. Massumi. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987).

² . *Ibid.*, p. 500.

³ . Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans., D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1994; Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The House of Gender' in Colomina ed., *Sexuality and Space*, 1992), pp. 327-389.

⁴ . Hürriyet. (2013, June 10) Erdoğan 'Camiye içkiyle girdiler' iddiasını tekrarladı (Erdoğan repeated the claim that they entered the mosque with alcoholic drinks) Retrieved August 17, 2013 from <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/23468860.asp>

⁵ . Sözcü. (2013, June 2). Erdoğan: Erkek kız aynı bankta oturursa [Erdoğan: If boy and girl share a bench] Retrieved August 16, 2013 from <http://sozcu.com.tr/2013/gundem/erdogan-erkek-kiz-ayni-bankta-oturursa.html>

⁶ . Woman in Red is the title of a 1984 film directed by Gene Wilder, which is about a married man who is infatuated by a woman in red. Chris de Burgh's hit song, Lady in Red was released in 1986.

⁷ . BBC Türkçe. (2013, June 18) Kimdi peki bu duranadam? [Who is this standing man then?] Retrieved August 15, 2013 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/06/130618_duranadam_kim.shtml

⁸ . Mikhail Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*, H. Iswolsky trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁹ . According to KONDA, the age average of the protesters was 28. Emre Kongar and A. Küçükkaya, (2013). *Gezi direnişi* [Gezi Resistance]. (İstanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 2013), p. 32).

¹⁰ . A report prepared by a party representative was published on August 12, 2013 in national newspapers. See: Ulusal Kanal, AKP: Stratejik hata yaptık [AKP: We made a strategic mistake] <http://www.ulusalkanal.com.tr/gundem/akp-stratejik-hata-yaptik-h13450.html>. Retrieved August 16, 2013.

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