

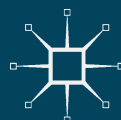
In the Aftermath of Gezi

From Social Movement to Social Change?

Edited by Oscar Hemer
and Hans-Åke Persson



Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change



Palgrave Studies in Communication
for Social Change

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In the Aftermath of Gezi

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This anthology is the outcome of a seminar with the same title, held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 4–5 May 2015, shortly before the second anniversary of the events that are commonly referred to as the Gezi Park Occupation. The two-day seminar was the third of four seminars organised as part of MICS (Migration, Identity, Communication and Security in Eurasia), a Nordic network for area studies in Turkey and Eurasia, supported by a grant for initiation of research from the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond). The rationale was to promote cooperation and scholarly advances in issues pertaining to the four areas Migration, Identity, Communication and Security. The May 2015 seminar, focused on Communication, was co-organised with Örecomm Centre for Communication and Glocal Change, a transnational (interregional) research group based at the universities of Malmö (Sweden) and Roskilde (Denmark). The interdisciplinary academic expertise of these two research networks, combined with the lived experience of activists and media practitioners in Turkey, provided for a fruitful exchange and sparked the idea of this book. The present anthology has however, as we will explain in the introductory chapter, little more than the name in common with the seminar. Five of the twelve authors have been invited to contribute to the volume after the seminar, and the remaining seven have substantially revised their original papers, in the light of the recent dramatic development in Turkey.

Many people have been involved in the effort to make this timely publication possible. First of all, we thank the authors for their arduous effort, and especially Asu Aksoy, who played an important part in the planning of the seminar, in spite of being unable to participate, and Ayhan Kaya, who volunteered as co-editor for the final anthology. Thomas Tufte was our co-organiser of the seminar and co-editor in the initial phase of the anthology project. We also thank the other presenters at the seminar for their valuable input; Cengiz Aktar, Christian Christensen, Sofia Hafdell, Serhat Koç, Zeyno Pekünlü, Pola Rojan, Milja Rämö and Reece Waldron.

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Last, but certainly not least, we wish to honour the absent author. Writer and human rights' activist Aslı Erdoğan accepted our invitation but was unable to contribute, as she was arrested in August 2016, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. Accused of spreading terrorist propaganda, as contributor to the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Gündem*, she was to spend 132 days in jail before being conditionally released for her trial, which started on 29 December 2016. As we write this, she is still facing the threat of being sentenced to lifelong imprisonment.

This anthology is dedicated to her.

Simrishamn, Sweden
April 2017

Oscar Hemer
Hans-Åke Persson

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In the Aftermath of Gezi: Introduction

Oscar Hemer and Hans-Åke Persson

A LIMINAL MOMENT

Travelling to Istanbul on 7 June 2016, to start the editing process of this anthology, we learned, on arrival at Kemal Atatürk Airport, that a major bomb blast had happened the same morning in central Istanbul. When we opened our phones they were full of worried messages and even a serious advice, from one of our home universities, to refrain from travelling.

We didn't know exactly what had happened—the details were disclosed later¹—but we could sense the tension in the surprisingly chilly air. Terror attacks were yet to become routine, but the tourism industry had already suffered severely after the January attack by a female Chechen suicide bomber, killing thirteen, all foreigners, mostly Germans, and wounding another fourteen in the historical Sultanahmet district, and the similar targeting of foreigners two months later in a side alley to the main İstiklal street in the modern city centre.² Now it was

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the beginning of summer, supposedly high season, but there were hardly any foreign tourists to be seen from Tünel to Taksim, and we discovered (to our own surprise) that we walked Istiklal Caddesi with certain alertness to suspicious loners, male or female, or sudden sounds or movements. And we read fatigue in the faces that looked past us, and despair in the eyes of the waiters at the almost empty restaurants.

For one of us, who had made his first visit to Istanbul, as a reporter, in late 1998, there was a peculiar feeling of déjà-vu, like having come a full circle back to that winter of the so-called Öcalan crisis, when Italy had refused to surrender the captured PKK leader to Turkish law, and infuriated demonstrators burned Italian ties and spaghetti in the streets. Galatasaray was playing Juventus in the Champions' League, luckily to a draw, because there was murder in the air (now, 18 years later, the opening games of the Euro Cup, heavily sponsored by Turkish Airlines, were screened in deserted sports bars).

The other of us, who happened to be in Istanbul for the first time in June 2013, at a conference that coincided with the culmination of the popular protests in Gezi Park and Taksim Square, was caught in the wave of fleeing protesters and spectators along Istiklal Caddesi, after the violent cleansing of the square by the police force. The government's forceful response seemingly put an end to what three weeks earlier, on 28 May, had started with a small group of environmental activists protesting against the demolition of a symbolic green space in the heart of Istanbul. The initially modest demonstration soon turned into a social justice movement, based on various claims ranging from environmentalist concerns, anti-neoliberal stances, anti-government and anti-islamist sentiments to a forceful reaction against the use of excessive force and the police's brutality towards the protesters, promoting not only the right to defend Gezi as a public space but raising wider and deeper concerns with regard to civic rights and individual freedoms.

Gezi is the focal point of this anthology; Gezi, viewed as a *liminal moment*, to use the late British anthropologist Victor Turner's concept (Turner 1974), whose symbolic meaning and political significance has shifted in the years that have passed since the events, and whose long-term historical implications remain to be revealed. When we organised the seminar at the Swedish Research Institute, our aim was to put Gezi in context of other similar forms of (spontaneous) social protest movements in the early 2010s, most notably the so-called Arab Spring, and the "occupy" movements of Europe (Spain, Greece) and

the Americas (USA, Brazil, Chile). A common denominator for all these more and less extensive popular upheavals seemed to be the key role that social media played, in the social mobilization as well as in the support and maintenance of the movements. The impetus in current media and communication research on social media, civic engagement and social movements can clearly be traced back to the discussions at the IAMCR conference in Istanbul in July 2011,³ which happened to coincide with the culmination of the Arab Spring and where the emerging new forms of social mobilization were debated in almost every panel (Hemer and Tufte 2016). The momentum is multi-disciplinary. While it has arguably pushed media and communication studies in a direction of less media-centric and more globally oriented perspectives, it has sparked an increasing interest in media and communication practices in other areas within the humanities and social sciences; among political scientists (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Kavada 2011, 2014; Della Porta and Rucht 2013; Mattoni and Treré 2014, 2016), sociologists (Couldry 2012; Gerbaudo and Treré 2015; Mayer et al. 2016), and anthropologists (Postill 2014a, b; Mollerup and Gaber 2015), to name only a few.

At the time of the seminar, relatively little had as yet been published about Gezi outside Turkey; only one anthology (Özkırmılı 2014, with an oft-quoted foreword by Judith Butler), although others were under way (David and Toktamış 2015; Koç and Harun 2015). The “lady in red dress” being pepper-sprayed has indeed become one of the “riot icons”, at par with the Anonymous’ Guy Fawkes mask (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015: 865), but the Gezi protests play a surprisingly marginal role in the abundant recent literature on media practices and social movements.

The seminar in May 2015 gathered academics and activists, from Turkey, the Nordic countries, and India. The academic affiliations ranged from History and Political Science to Social Anthropology and Media and Communication Studies. It was a fruitful interdisciplinary exchange of perspectives and analyses, and we, as editors, with a shared non-specialist interest in Istanbul and Turkey, were urged by some of the participants to pull together a publication. We were however hesitant to produce “another anthology”, unless we were convinced that it really added substantially to the previous ones. And after we had taken the decision to move forward, the process from seminar to anthology turned out to be more complicated than we had expected, partly—or mostly—due to the dramatic political development in Turkey after the seminar, starting with the elections in June 2015, when the People’s Democratic

Party, HDP, managed to cross the 10% barrier to parliament and block President Erdoğan's first attempt at constitutional reform,⁴ followed by the termination of the peace negotiations between the government and the PKK guerrilla and the renewal of both the government's military campaign and the terror attacks by different militant Kurdish groups, and culminating with the failed military coup attempt on 16 July 2016, and the subsequent purging of alleged Gülen supporters and sympathisers from public office.⁵ While complicating our task as editors, these dramatic occurrences have also worked to the favour of this anthology. All the seven contributors who participated in the seminar have revisited their analyses in the light of the current events, and the remaining five authors, who were invited specifically to contribute to the anthology, have finalised their chapters as the coup attempt and its aftermath have evolved.

The aftermath of Gezi may, in this on-going turn of perspective, seem to be fading. What was celebrated as a sign of democratic maturity in a modern, prospective EU member state, economically prosperous yet burdened by a legacy of political authoritarianism, now may rather appear as an almost futile, courageous attempt to articulate visions of a pluralist political sphere in an increasingly repressive, conservative society, which perfectly fits Russian researcher Vladimir Gel'man's concept "electoral authoritarianism" (Gel'man 2015). Spyros Sofos (Chap. 4 in this volume) even suggests the analogy to German writer Hans Fallada's novel *Alone in the City*, about resistance in Nazi Germany. Yet the "almost" is an important reservation that refutes the parallel.

As demonstrated by the chapters of this anthology, there are many points of reference from which an understanding of the liminal moment of Gezi can begin. Before presenting the prism of perspectives in the following chapters, we like to dwell a little on one reference point, which at the time of the seminar did not stand out as clearly as it did on our return one year later for the start of the editorial process.

THE ÖCALAN PARADOX

1998 marked the 75th anniversary of the Turkish Republic; İstiklal Caddesi was adorned with leafy portals with the stylized jubilee emblem and Kemal Atatürk's portrait in numerous varieties. At Galatasaray, an outdoor photo exhibition celebrated the modern republic's formative decade. The defiant confidence of the pictured citizens, not least the

women, evoked dual associations: to the enlightened pioneers of liberal democracy as well as the forerunners of totalitarian ideologies. Turkey's own modernist recipe, Kemalism, is—or was—a strange hybrid of fervent nationalism and extreme (secular) anti-traditionalism. As opposed to the contemporary European fascism, Atatürk's authoritarian state was based on republican citizenship. "The shaping of a citizen" was the title of the jubilee exhibition and the wall of the facing bank office was covered by portraits of "ordinary" Turks, displaying the ethnic diversity of the young republic. The Macedonian Kemal, with his Northern European complexion (light hair, blue eyes), incarnated the inclusive national identity: "He is Turk who calls himself Turk". The gaze of Atatürk was ever-present, from the hip disothèque near Taksim square to the food stall by the Egyptian bazaar, and not only for the Jubilee. As late as 2011, when one of us last visited Istanbul before Gezi, the Atatürk portrait was a compulsory prop at every establishment, public or not. Five years later, the displaying of Kemal's profile or signature stands out as a statement of protest against his presuming successor as father of the nation, Recep Erdoğan—the same Erdoğan who, in 1998, as the mayor of Istanbul, was popular even among the *bobos* (bourgeois bohemians) of Beyoğlu.

The resistance to Kemalism had two main bases: the Islamic clergy and the Kurdish minority. The Kurds was the only minority big enough to oppose assimilation under the Turkish nationalist banner. In 1998 this two front conflict remained intact, and the Kurdish question had nearly escalated to war with Syria, in the preceding phase of the Öcalan crisis.⁶ South-eastern Turkey was in a state of close to civil war since 1984, when the PKK, founded in 1978, had announced a Kurdish uprising. The tension augmented in rapidly growing Istanbul with its huge share of the Kurdish population.⁷ Interviewed during the Öcalan crisis, Kurdish writer Muhsin Kızılkaya evoked the memory of the Cyprus crisis in 1974, when Turkish nationalists were instigated to attack Greeks, and pointed to the imminent risk of massacres if the situation got out of hand; "people are inflammable like matches".⁸ Like other moderate Kurds, Kızılkaya hoped that Öcalan would be granted political asylum in the EU, in which case he would have had to send a message of peace to his supporters and hence facilitate a platform for a possible political solution.

However, Italy did not accept Öcalan's request for asylum; nor did any other European country. After a detour through Greece and Kenya, in an operation that involved the CIA, he was captured and brought to

Turkey, where he was sentenced to death. The severe crisis in Turkish–European relations thus appeared to have a nightmarish conclusion from the Kurdish point of view, but the paradoxical outcome of the Öcalan crisis was instead a rapprochement to Europe, and the admission of Turkey’s candidature to the EU at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999. Öcalan’s death sentence was converted to life imprisonment, and the Kurdish–Turkish military confrontation was put to a ceasefire that would last for 5 years (1999–2004).⁹ During this interregnum, the AKP rose to power, in 2002, on an agenda of moderate Islamism and neoliberal economic reform. Turkey has arguably never been as close to EU membership as during the early years of Erdoğan’s regime.

TURKEY AND THE EU: PROGRESSION AND SETBACKS

The process of *europeanisation* in Turkey has a fairly long history (see Ayan Kaya’s chapter in this volume). A first period, from 1959 to 1963, may be labelled as one of opportunities, possibilities and high expectations. The next period, between 1989 and 1992, would be one of opportunities and crises, and the third and last period, from 2008 to 2015, may at a quick glance be referred to as that of many crises and few opportunities. All in all, the more than five decades of relations between Turkey and EEC/6, EEC 9, EU 15 and EU 24 can be described as a cycle of progression and setbacks. One simple explanation is the constant exchange of players—or shifting sands—on both sides.

We should not forget that the first essential steps in aligning the European Common Market and Turkey were taken during the Cold War. The formative relationship should mainly be viewed through military-political lenses. Turkey was part of the “Western Allies”, as created by the necessities of the bipolar conflict. The construction of the Soviet Union as the ‘other’ made Turkey an integral part of the European security structure. The Turkish slogans at the time announced “a turning point in Turkish history” and embraced “Europeanisation” as a pathway to “development” and “democracy” (Eralp and Torun 2015).

The second period coincided with the end of the Cold War and the years of triumphant liberalism in the early ‘90s—“The End of History”, as US American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama famously labelled the moment.¹⁰ Lack of liberal democratic culture certainly handicapped the many new potential candidate countries, including Turkey,

yet the Western model of liberal democracy was the self-assured global standard that would eventually bring freedom and prosperity to all.

But after what in hindsight may appear as the historical parenthesis of the 1990s, between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumbling Twin Towers of 9/11, the future has become much more difficult to imagine in terms of linear teleology. Therefore this second period can be regarded as both dynamic and chaotic, with many alternative future scenarios for Turkey's relation to the expanding, deepening and broadening European community.

In short, this is a time of openness and crisis. The emergence of crisis might be dependent on a specific development, but the response to the crisis is, at least potentially, path breaking rather than path dependent, as the analyses focus on shifting developments into new directions rather than confirming old ones.

The last testing ground would be from 2008 to the present, and this is where Gezi comes in. Regarded through the lens of modernity, the European–Turkish relations could be defined as a permanent tension between critique and crisis, and concepts such as “post-westernisation” and “post-enlargement” are commonly applied. The scope narrows between experiences and expectations—between a disintegrating Europe and a rapidly changing Turkey. We perceive this as if time accelerates; the experiences become even more difficult to interpret and translate into horizons of expectations, as illustrated by the following quotation from Romano Prodi, former Prime Minister of Italy and former President of the European Commission, in 2010:

We are wasting a historical opportunity. I can only hope that the opportunities will come again. That the EU will be united before the new power order in the world is established. For we are moving from a unipolar world to a multipolar world. And we lose the opportunity to become one of the poles.¹¹

Prodi's apparent frustration over what he saw as the great modern European project slipping away from him and his generation has direct or indirect bearings on the EU/Europe–Turkey relation. In Turkey, a similar frustration has grown out of never being fully accepted as part of Europe, in spite of historical bonds and NATO membership, and seeing one after the other of newer—and poorer—candidate states pass by in the queue. The real obstacle to Turkish EU membership, which in recent

years has been explicitly pronounced by several member states, almost by way of a veto, is Islam. Secular or not, the prospect of letting 80 million Muslims into the European community is one of the horror scenarios for the surging right-wing populist movements all over Europe.

Erdoğan's EU friendly policy was perhaps rather motivated by domestic political concerns, vis-à-vis the Kemalists, than by real aspirations to become a member of the union. Gezi, and even more the elections in 2015, appear as a turning point also in the EU–Turkey relations. Again, as during the Öcalan crisis, the situation in neighbouring Syria, and the resurfacing Kurdish–Turkish military conflict, are key determinants.

WHITE TURKS VERSUS BLACK TURKS

In 1998, the Kurdish question overshadowed the other conflict; that between the Kemalist republicans and the Islamist traditionalists. This latter conflict has also been described in terms of “white” Turks versus “black” Turks.¹² The white Turks represented the self-understanding of the urban republican elite, whereas the black Turks referred to its despicable opposite: the supposedly backward, religious, conservative population of rural Anatolia.

Erdoğan has interestingly identified himself as a black Turk. Already during his time as mayor of Istanbul, there were warnings about a hidden Islamist agenda, and incidents of clashes around classical controversies such as the veiling of women and the public consumption of alcohol. But these warnings were largely seen as alarmist exaggerations from the challenged old elite. The renewed interest in the Ottoman times could just as well be interpreted as the search for a possible alternative vision for a modern multicultural society (in a way similar to Spanish intellectuals' renewed interest in medieval al-Andalus during the transition after the Franco regime).

Turkey's rise from the rubble of the imploded Ottoman empire was no doubt one of the most radical modernist projects, with the explicit ambition to turn the back on the feudal and Islamist “Middle East” and become an integral part of modern and secular Europe. It was literally an overnight shift, from Arabic to Latin alphabet, from the Muslim to the Christian calendar. A radical language reform moreover intended to cleanse the Ottoman hybrid Turkish from Arabic and Persian influences, making the older literature illegible to newer generations. As if that were not enough, Kemal Atatürk had history rewritten

to better suit the purpose of the nation-building project. The Turkish History Foundation, *Türk Tarih Kurumu*, founded in 1931, relocated the “cradle of civilization” from ancient Greece to Central Asia, which incidentally also was the mythical original home of the Turks (this reinterpretation was not entirely unfounded, and of course neither more nor less ideologically motivated than the idealization of the “Greek miracle” as the pillar of European or Western identity).

In Gezi the simplified white versus black Turk dichotomy was overruled in the sense that Kemalists joined forces with Kurds—although the Kurdish organizations adopted a wait-and-see policy and deliberately refrained from playing an active role. The new fault line that emerged in Gezi, and which has been evidently manifested in its aftermath—and in the Constitutional Referendum of 16 April 2017—could be described as the (electoral) majority vs. the minorities. After the failed coup d’état in July 2016, which possibly was an attempted (tactical) alliance between old and new elites (Kemalists and Gülen supporters), the populist strand of the AKP government has become even more accentuated. As Anita Sengupta notes in Chap. 3 in this volume, Erdoğan ironically had his own “Gezi moment” when his supporters took to the streets to defend him during the night of the coup.

FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENT TO SOCIAL CHANGE?

The subtitle of this anthology has a question mark. As already stated, the immediate answer to the question whether Gezi has led to social change would seem to be: No. Gezi appears at the moment as a singular event, with little lasting impact. But that could be said about many historical moments of protest that have momentarily caught the world’s attention, seemingly to no avail. Tiananmen square in Beijing in 1989 is a comparison that comes easily to mind. Yet, it was the first time in Turkey that people of different backgrounds and convictions took to the streets in a spontaneous protest against the government. That is, by all means, a significant fact. The social media networks were pivotal for the dissemination of the protests, in Turkey as well as across the globe. As Ayhan Kaya points out in the Epilogue, the *Occupygezi* movement was tweeted, not televised. Yet, the implications of the *connective action* (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) may have tended to be over-emphasized in the recent studies on social media and social movements, which, according to political scientists Alice Mattoni and Emiliano Treré, suffer from two main

biases: “the one-medium bias and the technological-fascination bias” (Mattoni and Treré 2014, 254). Gezi and its aftermath appear as an apposite trial case for their suggested conceptual framework for studying the interplay between social movements and the media (Ibid., 256). Temporarily or terminally hampered, the core of this on-going (and open-ended) social change process can perhaps simply be summarized as giving new meaning to citizenship.

THE CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The ten chapters all address the events that took place in Gezi park and Taksim square in Istanbul and spread to other parts of Turkey during the summer of 2013. They represent however a variety of perspectives, themes, and approaches and hence provide a rich plethora of possibilities to understand and explain these events and their aftermath. Some of the key themes or concepts that tend to be concerted among the contributors are: the public sphere, Europeanisation, secularism, neo-liberalism, Islamism, competing modernisations, social media and traditional networks, centre and periphery, and last but not least the relation between city planning and cultural politics. The latter is the subject of Chap. 2, in which Asu Aksoy demonstrates how the the Gezi Park occupation challenged and threatened the authoritarian and increasingly ideological cultural politics of the AKP government, and how, according to her analysis, the protesters from all different walks of life ruptured the government’s ambition to turn Taksim square into the symbolic crowning of its politics.

In Chap. 3, Anita Sengupta is also focusing on the symbolic meaning of the protests, although from a different perspective. Her analysis highlights the rhetoric that surrounded the Gezi Park events and, more specifically, the sharp differences between the supporters of the AKP and those who have opposed its policies in the course, rhetoric and counter-rhetoric, of the recent protests throughout Turkey. In the chapter’s “Aftermath” Sengupta also reflects on the role of the Turkish military, after the recent failed coup and over time in the history of the Republic.

Chapter 4, by Ronald Stade, addresses the problem of “the tyranny of the majority”. Inspired by anthropologist and Occupy activist David Graeber’s suggestion that the retention of power through violence produces “systemic stupidity”, Stade applies this argument to the Gezi case and proposes that the nature and role of rhetorical violence in the public