The Gezi Revolt and the Solidarist Individualism of « Çapulcu » Women (marauder)

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Introduction:

In June 2013, a resistance emerged in Turkey: the defence of The Gezi Park, which resulted in its occupation, and the establishment of a camp managed as an autonomous commune by various groups. This opposition quickly spread to other cities in Turkey and caused waves of resistance that lasted all summer. After its violent flattening, the Gezi Movement continued in neighbourhood forums, solidarity organisations and urban resistance movements. Despite the often repeated claim that the Gezi movement ended in the wake of the electoral failures of the oppositional parties and no longer influences the political scene, the effects of this movement remain significant: predominantly at the social and cultural levels, but also at a political level, if we think of the 2015 elections in which the

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1 Aysen Uysal, (2013) « Polis Halkı İsyana Teşvik eder mi?: Protesto Eylemlerinin Kaynağı Olarak Polis Şiddeti » (Est-ce que la police provoque la révolte du peuple ?: la violence policière en tant que source des actions de protestation), Birikim, 291-292


AKP lost its absolute majority in the parliament. It is only after the re-emergence of the armed conflict with the PKK that the effects of the Gezi movement started being challenged. The Gezi revolt was a peaceful one and its impacts remained relatively weak during the period of armed conflict. It seems that the voices of peace actors cannot be easily heard under the deafening sound of weapons.

In this article we want to analyse the social change provoked by the Gezi Revolt through its impact on female subjects, in order to understand its relative decline in the following period.

Methodology and field description

The Gezi Revolt has brought to Turkey a new type of subjectivity, based on a new type of individual, which we call the "solidarist individual". This new form of individualism is constructed in opposition to another definition of the "individual" which, since the 1980s in Turkey, has attempted to combine two contradictory approaches: one favouring the atomised individual, based on competition and in tune with the neoliberal ideology; the other favouring the submission of the individual to patriarchal authority. In a socio-political context lacking civil society and unions, the submission of atomised individuals to a patriarchal state authority was inevitable. But, in the Gezi Resistance, we see the emergence of a new type of solidarist individual, opposed to these atomised individuals of

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5 Keyder Caglar (1993), Ulusal Kalkinmacılığın Iflası (la défaite du développementalisme national), Metis, Istanbul
neo-liberalism. This is not a particularity of the Gezi resistance. As Hardt and Negri emphasise, it is about the “singularization” in resistances of the 2010s, which embodies the potential of subjectivity of the outraged at the global level:

"Indignation, for example, which expresses individual suffering, alludes even in its solitary resistance to being together. It becomes singular, because becoming singular, in contrast to becoming individual, means finding once again the subjective force in being together. A singular subjectivity discovers that there is no event without a recomposition with other singularities [...] A process of singularization is thus incarnated: a self-affirmation, a self-valorization, and a subjective decision that all open toward a state of being together."

With our research team, we decided to conduct fieldwork with the Gezi movement’s actors, to be able to understand the social transformation that occurred during and after Gezi, and the construction of new Subjects in Turkey. We focused on the resistance’s female activists: in the Gezi movement, 51% of activists were women, according to a survey realised by the polling company KONDA. But women in Gezi were not only dominant in terms of numbers. On the one hand, they were the icons of the movement (when you look at posters and allegories of the Gezi movement, you mostly see pictures of women: “woman in red” and “woman in black”, photographed while resisting police violence, are the most famous ones); on the other hand, they intervened in, and transformed, the language of protesting and

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6 This article is based on a research project (Project of Galatasaray University BAP N° 14.502.001 entitled "The New Solidarist Individual and New Social Movements: The Constitution of New Women Subjects in Turkey") led by Buket Turkmen and Hakan Yucel from Galatasaray University, Zeynep Güler Göker from Sabancı University and Hande Coşkan from Erasmus Mundus Master Program in Crossways in Cultural Narratives.

they were the main organisers of the Park commune. As we focused our research on female activists in Gezi, we tried to see the continuities and ruptures of these actors with the woman's movement in Turkey. Furthermore we tried to understand the impacts of “solidarist individualism” on the subjectivisation of feminist and non-feminist women: we did not focus our analysis solely on feminist-activist women, but also on looked at unorganised women, who made up an important part of the Gezi activists. We used a qualitative method: through interviews and focus groups conducted with organised and unorganised women of different generations, social classes, identities and political tendencies. More specifically, our fieldwork was realised through the participant observation of four sociologists involved in the revolts (we used the methods of engaged sociology⁸), followed by semi-direct-in-depth interviews with 30 female activists, and 4 thematic focus-groups with female Gezi activists, on the following themes: "violence in Gezi", "relations to the political space", "new organisations and solidarity" and "the heritage of Gezi two years after." This last focus group was conducted in September 2014, with the main female spokespersons of the various organisations that participated in the occupation of the park.

Our research investigated:

- How “Gezi women” experienced the street actions, the confrontations with the police and the commune during Gezi; and the neighborhood forums, solidarity organisations and other urban resistance movements following Gezi;
- To what extent this experience of resistance transformed their relationship to their gendered identity;
- How they constructed themselves as new political subjects in the following period.

The continuity and the rupture of Gezi Women with the feminist struggle in Turkey
During Gezi, women with very diverse identities participated in the protests: from left-wing groups, anti-capitalist Islamic groups, secularist or nationalist groups, Kurdish groups, to LGBT organisations, feminist groups, as well as non-organised women were there. This fact should be interpreted in continuity with the history of women’s struggle in Turkey. We can say that the paths followed by diverse groups of women in Turkey before Gezi took them to the park. Before presenting our field notes, we should briefly recapitulate this history in order to investigate its impacts and its discontinuities after Gezi.

In the second half of the 1980s and 90s, a new women’s voice arose in Turkey. Turkey’s second generation of feminists have severely criticised the republican historiography, which advocated an official feminism. This official feminism stated that Turkish women had been liberated from Islamic traditions and patriarchy thanks to the Kemalist republic, whereas the new feminist reading was stating that women in the Turkish Republic were emancipated but not liberated. During the Kemalist

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period, every time that they had their own political organisations, they were excluded from the public/political sphere. In other words, they were allowed to become the autonomous subjects of the new modern society, but their submission to official feminism was encouraged.

In the 1990s, in continuity with this feminist critique, different groups of women developed networks of common struggle against misogynist body politics of governments. In those years we saw more and more Kurdish women, Islamist women, Alevi and left-wing women struggling together. The common struggle was against the law limiting abortion, the prohibition of the headscarf in the public sphere – as a consequence many Muslim women were excluded from universities and other public areas, so left-wing secular feminists struggled with their Muslim sisters against these types of body politics – and more recently, since the end of the 90s, we have seen socialist feminists and Kurdish liberation movement women struggling together in peace activisms.11

So the « convergence of struggles », which was the characteristic of Gezi, was not a new phenomenon for women. They came to Gezi with this heritage of common struggle that they had been through since the 90s. When they joined the resistance, they intervened in the language used and the repertory of actions performed. Especially in the Park, they forbade the use of profane and sexist language in slogans. Socialist feminists built a « women’s tent » during the occupation, calling it « the zone without Tayyip12 and without harassment » and this tent became, in Gezi, a meeting point for women with different identities. They suggested together new types of performative actions – actions borrowed from the feminist and LGBT repertoire– and they feminised the slogans. They worked together efficiently in

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11 Çağlayan, Handan, Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar (les mères, les camarades et les déesses). Istanbul: Metis, 2007; Bora, Aksu, ibid

12 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is called as “Tayyip” by women
the organisation of the Park commune. We suggest that the « feminisation of the occupation » occurred as a consequence of this common struggle.

After meeting in the park and living this resistance experience together, women who had not participated in any political action before Gezi started to attend neighbourhood solidarity groups, urban resistance groups, green resistance or feminist organisations; and some joined political party campaigns, and observer groups during elections.

The Parc: the experience of resistance and women

The Gezi movement was based on local actions with global resonances, just like in the European outrages, the Arab revolts\(^\text{13}\), or the global alter-activism in of the 2010s\(^\text{14}\). These collective actions were essentially based on individual performances and were characterised by their spontaneity and their use of humour.

Gezi was also the meeting and collaboration between experienced activists and previously unorganised women. Those who were not in any political organisation before Gezi experienced it as a first experience of street action, and considered this movement as an unprecedented break in Turkey's political life, as an event that would change history and the political field. As for the women already politicised before Gezi, like (B), a young Kurdish woman who had lived all her life in Cizre (a Kurdish village) and came from a family engaged in the Kurdish movement, they were wary of "this exaggeration

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of Gezi ", and felt a kind of “mistrust” towards it at the beginning:

« We, with my friends, did not expect much from Gezi at first. It's normal, you say "until then, all these people have not reacted to anything, so much has happened in my home town [Cizre and Kurdish region], and here in Istanbul they were silent ". [...] And then I saw my friends from the university at the park, who never participated in anything, but they were there [...] I went there every day. I really liked their slogans, the graffiti, this atmosphere of Gezi. (...) Well, I used to participate in the left-wing organizations before Gezi, but they were meaningless, so this new creativity impressed me a lot [...]. Finally it was impressive to fight all together against the police.» (B.)

For women that were already organised, Gezi often represented a breaking point from their previous experiences in socialist, feminist or other kinds of activism. What distinguished the movement was its respect for the individual. Indeed this was a movement, reclaiming among others things, respect for individual dignity; it was also an uprising against the government’s disrespectful intrusions to its citizen’s personal lives. This was especially true for women. According to the interviews, the gathering of all these women in Gezi was the result of the state's deepening misogynistic policies and its interventions on women's lives and bodies. The intrusion of the state on female citizens’ body is concretised during the Gezi movement by police violence.

"There was state violence and it acted differently on women. There were harassments under detention.” (Meeting between Women's forums in September 2013)

As a result of this lived experience of police violence, women moved on to another stage of resistance. They crossed the threshold of fear and went beyond it in anger, a step that also had an impact on their activism after Gezi:
"We had a terrible violence in Gezi but we dared to go because we were confronting this violence all together ... People were helping each other, when there was gas, we swallowed it together, we all ran out of plastic bullets together.... In this crowd, we felt protected. We were protecting each other”
(Performance artist, performed her plays in Gezi Park, member of the neighbourhood forum Abbasaga, 45, unorganized)

**Park Women and Barricade Women**

Among the women activists, two essential categories could be distinguished: those who were in the park and those who were at the barricades. The question of fear comes back often when we talk about fighting on the barricades. A woman who managed to resist on a barricade during police intervention gained prestige among her companions. These women, especially young women, were not numerous, but they were present.

"At first, the men look at your butt, before the fight begins. And after, the police arrive. There, everyone becomes a fighter. No difference between the man and the woman. I was there behind the barricade and suddenly I saw the gas capsule. I rushed and kicked the capsule away from the barricade like the others. There you become a comrade, you become the hero of the barricade.” (Medicine, member of the Chamber of Doctors and HDP party, 35 years old, organised.)

Women who preferred to stay in the park, justified it by talking about the need to manage the commune, created during the park’s occupation. Ensuring the living conditions necessary for the survival of the occupation was these women’s most important goal. When explaining this, they combined activism with their conception of "femininity":

"I always found something to be useful in the park: I was sometimes in the infirmary for the wounded, sometimes in the kitchen ... In the everyday life also I am like that: I was raised like this, to be useful means to be a woman! (Academic lawyer,
feminist, member of Yogurtcuparki Women's Forum, 33 years old, unorganised)

**Feminisation of the language of resistance**
The active and dominant presence of women in Gezi has also resulted in their intervention to the repertoires of action and the language used. Instead of «dissolving their femininity within the struggle», like in the previous period, they feminised the struggle. For the first time in such a huge revolt we could see some female activists wearing short skirts, make up and even high heels. They were not trying to hide their femininity in order to appear serious, but they were using it as a weapon to reverse its stigmatisation. In the Gezi Revolt the request for individual dignity translated among women activists into the request to respect their female identity. They forbade swearing using sexist terms during the resistance, and women of the socialist feminist organisation - Socialist Women Collectif (SFK) - built a workshop of "alternative swear words" in the Park Forum. They also created a "non-harassment and non-Tayyip zone" in a huge tent to collect complaints of harassment from other women and to prevent violence against women in the park.

Performativity is used as the language of the most used action - in continuity with the actions of women before Gezi - and slogans created as a result of the prohibition of swearing have brought out a creativity never seen in other social movements. Some of Gezi's graffiti testified to the feminisation of the movement, and emphasised a feminine humoristic style in the language used:

« *If you have gas, I have waterproof mascara!* »; "*Tayyip run run run, women arrive!*" or the feminisation of some sayings, such as: « *It’s inshallah revolution honey!* »

**The relationship between dignity and individual freedom**
The importance of individual freedom and dignity is often emphasised by the youngest, whereas it is considered with
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more reserve by the previous generation. But the complementarity of individual freedom and solidarity is accepted by all generations of women.

"My individual freedom is not negotiable. I am very disturbed when we do not respect my personal freedom zone. I fight against the one who does not respect it. But I think that personal freedom and solidarity between individuals are complementary. First, I must create an area of individual freedom so that I can enter into solidarity with others."

(University administrative officer, socialist-feminist, activist of IFK (Istanbul Feminist Collective) and Women's Forum Yogurtcuparki, 27 years old)

"If I can not protect my personal space in an organisation, it bothers me. We no longer live in a world made up of a single speech, a single identity, a single language."

(Student engaged in the Kurdish movement, 23 years old)

This prioritising of individual freedom is the most important feature of this new subject that formed in Gezi. These demands for individual freedom also implied the need for new modes of organisation. When we think to political culture and the post-republican period definition of citizenship in Turkey, we understand why this respect of individual dignity within the collective action is so important. In Turkey the definition of citizenship has always privileged submission, in a quasi-holistic way, of the citizens to the collective will. This collectivism was claimed both by the Islamist-nationalist movements and the Socialist and Marxist-Leninist movements. All of these

15 Füsun Üstel, Makbul Vatandaş"in Peşinde, II. Meşrutiyet'ten Bugüne Vatandaşlık Eğitimi, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2004); for the Kemalist secularism which provided a basis for a civic morality reinforcing the holistic spirit which subordinates the individual to society and the nation.” See Buket Türkmen, “Kemalist Islam renovated or sunnification of civic morality? A study on textbooks of the course of “Religious Culture and Morality” taught in high schools in Turkey”, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Vol. 29 N° 3, 2009.
movements branded individualism as being the equivalent of egoism, and considered it a betrayal to the struggle. Socialist women, recently underline in their writings that within the Marxist-Leninist organisations, they were living what they felt was a repression of their femininity and their individual freedom. They criticise a kind of Marxist patriarchy reigning in those organizations.\(^{16}\)

But the reference to individual dignity is not the sign of the rise of a liberal individualism in Gezi. People in Turkey, since the 80s, suffer from the encouragement of a competitive individualism, combined with the lack of a strong civil society\(^ {17}\). Thus, when the actors of the Gezi revolt, especially the 1990s generation (those born in the 1980s, the years of transition to democracy after the coup d'état of 1980, and who have lived their adolescence in the 1990s, the years of liberal ideology), for which individual freedom is paramount in the construction of their identity\(^ {18}\), gathered in the park to protest the policies of a government who no longer respected their individual freedoms. It was not only about the defence of the individual: individual and collective freedoms were two sides of the same coin for the

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\(^{17}\) Yerasimos S., Seufert G., Mert N., Schüler H., Can K., Groc G. et al., Türkiye'de Sivil Toplum ve Milliyetçilik [La société civile et le nationalisme en Turquie], İletişim, İstanbul (Turquie), 2002

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actors of Gezi. Thus, when people in Gezi were expressing their demands for individual freedom, they were not only defending their personal space.

Solidarist individualism emerges as a concrete consequence of experiencing the living conditions of a revolt, encampments, and resistance against police violence. Against the "machines of death" that the state used through transgressions of citizens' bodily borders by tear gas and excessive police violence, Gezi's peaceful resistance demonstrated the emergence of new fields of solidarity of resistant bodies: "Gezi is the struggle of disorderly bodies, those who do not have any device other than their bodies, against the death machines" (Gambetti, 2014). It is from this experience of solidarity, based on the respect for individual space, that we see the emergence of an improvised, unorganised and horizontal peaceful resistance.

The need for a new type of organisation and individual freedom

The need for a new type of organisation within resistance movements was underlined in many focus groups, especially in the one that was conducted with the Gezi women’s spokespersons. Many interviewees and discussants in the focus groups criticised the old political movements and said that they didn’t want to be in a hierarchical organisation anymore; they no longer want leaders, or to have to delegate their voice to a Central Committee who then makes the decisions. They prefer to create new types of organisations, which are horizontal networks, based on democratic decision-makings. They accuse the old ones of being trapped by their “organisational ego” – a term used by one of the women, who was an member of an illegal Marxist-Leninist organisation, which she left after Gezi. She thinks that these old organisations are far from integrating the capacity of social revolt, which showed up with Gezi, because of their “organisational ego”.

"Before, I was member of this illegal organisation, and that day I saw them outside the Gezi Park, they were in Taksim Square in front of the park. Because the park didn’t let them show off with their flags, they preferred to stay outside, instead of being with all these people. For years they wanted the people to revolt, now the people were in the Park and they were distinguishing themselves because this revolt was not organised by them. I was angry with them. (...) Whole people of Nurtepe were walking to Taksim Square from the highway and all these organisations decided to be apart, because the people didn’t listen to them, they didn’t obey their decisions. (...) After Gezi I left my old organisation (old member of a radical organisation, 32 years old, inhabitant of Nurtepe in Istanbul)

In the discussions, the women criticised three main things in the old organisations:

- Their hierarchical structure, which they believe creates distance with the ordinary people
- The cult of the leader
- The dissolution of their femininity within left-wing organisations.

So they tend to be organised within the horizontal networks. The solidarity-individualism, which is the respect of individual dignity within the solidarity with others, is the condition of the formation of new types of organisations, as expressed in focus groups. The horizontal type of organisation is experienced today within socialist-feminist collectives, some neighbourhood solidarity groups and some green solidarity movements. Women from different movements are still searching for new types of decision-makings and organisations. Yet, even though they all admit to this need for horizontal organisations, the individualistic attitude of the young activists can appear to the previous gen-

**Nurtepe is a neighborhood known as the district of Marxist-Leninist and Alevi groups (religious-ethnic minority in Turkey, often identified to the left)
eration as a threat to the integrity of the movements: in the focus
groups they complained about the risk of fragmentation in the
movements that could be caused by the youth’s ultra-
individualist sensibilities.

In the search for the type of organisation required by the
emergence of new subjects, both the elder and the younger
generations agree on the need to find a formula that would bring
together non-organised individuals and organised groups on the
same platforms. The actors of this new movement live both a
rupture and a continuity with those of the left movements of the
1970s. The common action being based on the experience of the
activism inherited from the past, this same experience can also
be discouraging for youth activism. Women of the previous
generation reproach to younger women and the new activism
(alteractivism) of being naïve and not sufficiently strategic or
discreet in their actions. The use of social media, such as
announcing actions on twitter is severely criticised by the "elder
sisters", former leftist activists of the 1970s and 1980s. Endowed
with traumatic memories of a period when leftist activism was
severely repressed, particularly after the coup d'état of 1980,
they have trouble understanding this new peaceful alteractivism,
organised via open calls on social media. The memory of illegal
cell-organisations is rooted in the troubled memories of this
der generation and their conception of illegal resistance creates
a distance difficult to overcome between these two generations
of women.¹⁹

Thus the two generations of activists seem to diverge on
two points: the conception of individual freedom and the degree
of discretion needed in the organisation of actions. These
divergences were surpassed during the Gezi Revolt, like many
other differences between different groups. But it is after Gezi,

¹⁹ For an indepth analysis of the relationship of the two generations of women
in Gezi, see Buket Türkmen, « L’individualisme solidariste des actrices de
Gezi et l’émergence de nouveaux sujets », Agora débats/jeunesses 2016/2
(N° 73), p. 119-133
especially with the rise of state authoritarianism under war politics that started in the summer of 2015, that these differences seem to grow, preventing the emergence of a common alteractivism.

**Conclusion: New Women-subjects in a Conflictual Historical Period**

The distinguishing characteristic of the Gezi movement, compared to those that preceded it, is that women attended while keeping their femininity. They came to Gezi Park to protest against state intervention on their personal freedom, and they defended their individual being within solidarity with others. It is from the complementarity between collective solidarity and individual freedom that we see the emergence of new types of horizontal activisms.

Despite the difficulties of such horizontalities, as we have shown in a previous work\(^\text{20}\), it must be admitted that women, in the period that followed Gezi, became the main actors of urban, political and ecological resistance. They have been involved in the government's "de-agriculture" policies for the economic reintegration of women who formerly worked in agriculture; they have organised protests against urban policies that marginalise women; and they conducted peace actions against the government's war policies in the South Eastern cities of the country. In short, they became the main oppositional actors in the public space, bringing the women's issue to the heart of any social protest. In this period of armed conflict and war, some Women initiatives of peace, namely the Women for Peace Initiative (BIKG), the Yogurtcuparki Women's Forum and some other independent women's groups remained the main peace activists in the public sphere to raise their voice.

\(^{20}\text{ibid}\)
Can the subject that has been constructed in a peaceful activism like Gezi survive in these conditions of violence and war? Should we listen to the words of some women in Gezi who still miss those days and maintain hope, in their search of new modes of resistance?

"This solidarity ... this solidarity was different ... All, we were for each other ... You're mostly by yourself in life, then you go there, and then ... [tears, interruption] .. It was just the world we wanted to live, we had created it at the park. One of those days of resistance, my friend had seen me and said: "I never saw you so happy" and I replied: "Yes! I am happy! We resist! We make history."» (Academic lawyer, feminist, member of Yogurtcuparki Women's Forum, 33 years old, unaffiliated)

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