

## **TAKSIM GEZI, 2013: Struggles over the city**

### **A Review Article on**

Efe Can Gürcan and Efe Peker, *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 202 pp. ISBN: 9781137469021

Umut Özkırmı (ed.), *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 154 pp. ISBN: 9781137413789

The Taksim-Gezi protests began on May 27, 2013, as a small campaign against redevelopment. The initial aim of those who gathered in Taksim Square was to stop developers from building an Ottoman-style shopping center that was to be housed in a replica of a military barracks building demolished 60 years ago. There are numerous shopping malls in İstanbul -- at least one in every neighborhood -- but only very few public green spaces. The main objection of the protesters was that the building of the shopping center would result in the destruction of much of Gezi Park, one of the last green spots remaining in central İstanbul (Europe's biggest city and the business capital of Turkey). However, the character of the protests changed when the Turkish police attacked demonstrators with overwhelming force and what started out as an environmental protest in İstanbul quickly turned into a nationwide political demonstration against the policies of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government. The protest rapidly gained support from a cross-section of society in İstanbul and other urban centers, leading to what was arguably the largest wave of protests in recent Turkish history. An estimated 3.5 million people took part in the protests over the course of the following few months. The protests were generally led and dominated by young urban professionals and university students and while they expressed a wide range of demands including wider access to resources and freedom of expression, desire for a new kind of urban living remained at the center of events.

It is no coincidence that the demonstrations started and were concentrated in İstanbul, the largest and the most developed urban center in Turkey. İstanbul is a unique example of contemporary urban development, with wide-scale urban transformation and regeneration projects in place. In the 1980s, soon after the Sept. 12, 1980, military coup in Turkey, the city witnessed the beginning of the neoliberal transformation and the celebration of urban property regeneration in line with transformations that had occurred in other metropolitan centers such as New York, London and Madrid since the 1960s. Metropolitan cities now have central significance in the system of global capitalist surplus production, renowned Marxist geographer David Harvey writes: "It is the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labour expended on and in the city. The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have had a part in producing it. This is, of course, the basis for the claim to the right to the city on the part of the collective labourers who have made it. The struggle for the right to the city is against the powers of capital that ruthlessly feed upon and extract rents from the common life that others have produced."<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, the Taksim-Gezi protests share common ground with a great many diverse social movements focusing on the urban question in countries such as India, Brazil, China, Spain, Argentina and the US.<sup>2</sup> Just a few months before the Taksim-Gezi protests started, Harvey spoke about the urban origins of the social movements and discussed İstanbul's rapid urbanization, asking: "What do we see in İstanbul? Cranes, everywhere."<sup>3</sup> According to Harvey, urbanization is a channel through which surplus capital flows to build/ re-build cities for those who can afford it. In his contribution to the analysis of the contemporary capitalist production process, Harvey says that such urban re-generation is a powerful and essential

course of action that in return defines what contemporary cities are about, as well as determining who can afford to live in these redesigned urban spaces and who cannot. The cities also happen to be the quintessential places where the contestation of neoliberal urbanization may take place in various forms and with different intensities. On the basis of this analysis, Harvey highlights the importance of challenging the state and addresses the ever-changing ideal of the city and the social groups that sustain and contest it.

The mainstream terminology used by the Western media and experts and shared by some left/liberal accounts, both in Turkey and abroad, makes comparisons between Taksim and Tahrir Square in Egypt by discussing the ability of the street to topple a government. Some even claimed that “the Gezi Park resistance is a [revolutionary] turning point for the people of Turkey. After many decades they feel their power again.”<sup>4</sup> However tempting, this reviewer believes such comparisons represent a gross over-simplification, based on a range of superficial similarities, many of which ignore social and political-economic differences between “Arab Spring” countries and Turkey. The political-economic roots of the events in Turkey are very different from those of its war-torn Arab neighbors; that is, the majority of Turkish protesters are young urban people, many with jobs or university students with reasonably good job prospects, rather than being unemployed and economically desperate, as many of the young people who took to the Arab streets were.

Turkey’s protests also need to be distinguished from the discontent expressed in some of its European neighbors, such as Greece and Spain, where weak economies brought unemployed youth onto the streets. The riot police in Turkey employed considerable use of force against the Taksim-Gezi protesters, not unlike Spanish, Italian, Greek and British police tactics during the same months, when hundreds of thousands of protestors marched to protest their governments’ austerity policies. In those European countries, comparable levels of police force were employed to pacify the protesters. Interestingly, however, none of these European events were considered a British, Greek or Spanish “Spring.”

Undoubtedly, the two events that the majority of accounts compare -- those of Turkey and Egypt -- started and centered in two symbolic squares -- Tahrir and Taksim. Just like Tahrir Square, Taksim has become a strong reminder of the power of public space; a number of normally rigorously competing football fans unified in their opposition to their governments’ policies, leaving aside their historical differences to defend “their city,” while protesters demanded the resignation of the government in both cases and the both police forces responded with violence.<sup>5</sup> The similarities end here, but nevertheless, some articles in the mainstream media focused on the Turkish government’s Islamism and the presence of secular groups within the demonstrations, presenting Turkey’s protests as yet another example of an Oriental Muslim dictator oppressing his mostly secular subjects. These interpretations tend to simplify complex and multi-layered events into gratifying morality tales about Western democratic secularists versus conservative Islamists.<sup>6</sup> They are also ethnocentric, presenting Muslims in clichés and run the risk of creating a cultural caricature.<sup>7</sup>

The books reviewed here are relatively recent volumes dealing with many of the abovementioned aspects, but unfortunately neither moves beyond existing gross over-simplifications, rather they repeat them in a variety of forms. They are quite different in their coverage and each puts forward a significantly different central argument, even if it is not always easy to identify. The first book, “The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey,” edited by Umut Özkırımlı, has nine short chapters, an introduction by the editor and a forward by Judith Butler. Butler’s forward is intensive, interesting and sophisticated but does not really deal with the Taksim Gezi movement(s) directly. It is useful as a general reflection based on various observations in the context of urban protest movements in our times.

In Özkırımlı's introduction, the book starts with a rather ambitious claim: "Much ink has been spilled since June 2013 to explain Gezi protests in the media, both domestic and international, most of it based on hasty analogues and banal platitudes [...] no academic analyses of the protests have been published so far. [...] We believe there is an urgent need for an intervention that attempts to offer a sober and critical reflection on the eighteen days that shook the model." However, two paragraphs later, Özkırımlı says that, "it is important to stress at the outset that we do not, in fact cannot, purport to offer a well-rounded analysis of the specific factors or the more general dynamics that have generated these protests as it is still too early to fully grasp the nature of the events."(p.3)

There have been many books and hundreds of articles published on the Taksim Gezi protests before the publication date of Özkırımlı's volume, many based on participant observations and interviews with protesters, and some more general political and social analyses. Even though the majority of these accounts fall in the category of gross over-simplification, there are some original and critical analyses that help us understand both the dynamics of the protest movements and the more general conditions that led to these protests.<sup>8</sup> After reading all the chapters in this book, this reviewer unfortunately concludes that he cannot find any basis for Özkırımlı's ambitious and strongly put claims at the start. All the chapters provide some useful accounts and reflections of the events that help the reader to make sense of the Taksim-Gezi movements, yet none provide us with anything really original and different from what Özkırımlı calls "non-scholarly" accounts.

The second volume reviewed here is "Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park," by Efe Can Gürcan and Efe Peker. The main difference of this book is explained at the start by the authors as being that the book "seeks to contribute to the Marxist analysis of the GPPs [Gezi Park protests] by focusing on its structural correlation of class forces, material-objective conditions and conjunctural opportunities, organizational forms, and articulation of political consciousness."(pp. 8-9) This attempt to prove the "working-class basis" of the Gezi Park protest(s) stays at the center of the book for the remaining 160 pages. This volume, it seems, was written as a counter argument against what the authors call "liberal-leftist figures in Turkey." Even though it is not really clear what the authors mean by this label, this reviewer assumes the label corresponds to a group of influential Marxian intellectuals who do not share these two authors' rather strict but not necessarily clear interpretation of Marxism. The authors criticize these so-called liberal-leftist authors for "employing buzzwords such as hegemony, historical bloc, the state, and ideology."<sup>9</sup> Ironically, one is repeatedly bombarded in this book, on almost every single page, with the over-usage of another set of buzzwords such as "Marxist framework," "wage-earning class fractions" and "working-class fractions." The authors here use Richard Edwards's definition of the working class as made up of three fractions including all wage-earners and most salaried employees, thereby including technicians, professionals, supervisors and middle management, and indeed all non-capitalists.(pp. 38, 43-44, 49) This definition, exclusively based on Edwards's observations of the working class(es) in the US, is synonymous with the category "labour."<sup>10</sup> This reviewer has a serious problem with the usage of the term "working class fractions"; every worker is a wage-earner, but not all wage-earners can be said to be workers. Many workers in Turkey – approximately 70 percent of all workers -- earn TL 1,200, the minimum wage, or around that figure. Many professionals such as engineers earn at least four times this amount as a starting salary. Middle managers earn much more -- up to 10 times of the average salary of a worker. Of course, company managers' astronomic earnings cannot even be compared to the minimum wage. All these people qualify as "wage-earners." So, considering all wage-earners to form part of the working class(es) is not very helpful; rather, it is an absurd attempt to prove that the middle-class(es) are actually members of the working class(es).

This reviewer found this volume frustrating for the most part because the authors use terms without explaining how they are being used, thereby failing to make them clear and precise. The book amounts to a confused jumble, a complete misrepresentation of Marx and his class analysis.

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The Taksim Gezi protests were democratic protest movements in a society that has experienced rapid change over the last 15 years and where the public's demand for better services and more democracy at the local and national levels is growing at a faster pace than their governments' ability and willingness to provide them.

In a clear sense, in Turkey, participatory democracy has been forcefully diluted amid an orgy of neoliberal mega-projects, generating dubious profits for a small elite around the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), given the AK Party's collusion with powerful business interests in the so-called re-development of İstanbul. This is a common feature of the contemporary capitalist system in the context of so-called urban re-development and cultural investment in and around many modern metropolitan centers. This is justified by an economic argument around the importance to capitalism of land, rent and speculation, more so than straightforward production. As Harvey notes, "[O]ver the past 30-40 years, where cities try to brand themselves and sell a piece of their history. What is the image of a city? Is it attractive to tourists? Is it trendy? So a city will market itself."<sup>11</sup>

There are many passages describing this situation in David Harvey's "Rebel Cities," such as:

*Much of the corruption that attaches to urban politics relates to how public investments are allocated to produce something that looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners. The distinction between urban public goods and urban commons is both fluid and dangerously porous. How often are development projects subsidized by the state in the name of the common interest when the true beneficiaries are a few landholders, financiers, and developers?*<sup>12</sup>

The events in Turkey in 2013 illustrate how the authorities responded to the public when their "grand" projects of neoliberal restructuring were challenged by their citizens, many of whom may have voted for the ruling party.

Despite the multiplication of slogans and the emerging chaos about the aims of the protesters, it is important to note that the protests of Turkey's urban youth are first and foremost a response to the ruling regimes' grandiose neoliberal projects of urban transformation, their gentrifying schemes with the aim of creating high-tech malls and skyscrapers and other expensive, grandiose projects. All this is part of the "violent neoliberal attack upon the public provision of social public goods over the last thirty years or more."<sup>13</sup>

It is also important to take note of the educated urban youth at the forefront of the resistance to such a neoliberal assault. To many analysts, young people's role in the protest movements came as a surprise, because young people had been identified as apolitical and individualistic for decades. With the protest movements in the summer of 2013, urban youth proved that they cared about how the current policies of their governments affect their lives, their urban space, their country and their fellow citizens, and that they are willing to protest resiliently.

Turkish youth were protesting because they were upset -- and rightly so -- about the priorities of their government for their cities and the manner in which these priorities were pursued without sufficient consultation. They demanded the right to participate in the planning and

distribution of their country's resources and to be heard and involved, linked to the feeling that they were not really able to be part of the decision-making that would alter their conceived urban space and day-to-day lives. They wanted the right to determine their own futures; they were no longer prepared to be talked down to by the government.<sup>14</sup> The protests can in one general sense be read as the articulation by those involved of what a fair and just world might be.<sup>15</sup> Rejecting the neoliberal notion that democracy and markets are the same, Turkish youth not only addressed some of the current injustices while reclaiming their urban space, but also began to produce new ideas with a new and very imaginative political language.

In the final analysis, the 2013 urban protest movements in Turkey represent these political and social struggles (struggles over the city, and its urbanization), at least the beginning of them. They were direct responses by youth in search of "a different way of urban living from that which was being imposed upon them by capitalist developers and the state."<sup>16</sup> In this reviewer's view, the demonstrations can be connected to a wider discussion, first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1968<sup>17</sup> and recently developed by David Harvey around "the right to the city," which is a right to democratic control over the process of urbanization. The specific aims of the protesters in İstanbul and other urban centers to keep a green space as a public park and defend affordable transportation fees for the urban public are in a general sense their attempt to reclaim their city, their urban space. Whatever the initial results or lack of specific gains of the recent protests, in 2013 Turkish youth created "a critical mass of political energy" for a "struggle to fashion an alternative to globalisation that does not trade on monopoly rents in particular or cave in to multinational capitalism in general," and initiated "a platform for what an alternative urbanization project might look like."<sup>18</sup>

The Taksim-Gezi protests showed that the relationship between the economic and social development of a country and the democratization of its political system is complex. This reviewer, however, believes that it would be safe to claim that there is a fragile but essential link between being strong economic development and establishing a stable democratic system in the long run: One cannot survive long without the other. Neither tends to last long in the conditions of the absence of the other. Today, despite its recent economic problems, Turkey is still a rising power, with its internationally competitive companies tapping cash-rich export markets in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East while still attracting some investment in return. However, all this progress will require a stable and functioning democracy to survive. It is not possible for Turkey to be a credible world power without achieving fully functioning democratic status, including freedom of expression and democratic rights. There is no exception to this; all existing evidence from transition countries point to this same conclusion. Turkey can become a genuine global power and a country at peace with the majority of its citizens only when its economic progress is matched by a strong, stable and functioning democratic system.

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<sup>1</sup> "The right to the city is not an exclusive individual right, but a focused collective right. It is inclusive not only of construction workers but also of all those who facilitate the reproduction of daily life: the caregivers and teachers, the sewer and subway repair men, the plumbers and electricians, the scaffold erectors and crane operators, the hospital workers and the truck, bus, and taxi drivers, the restaurant workers and the entertainers, the bank clerks and the city administrators." David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 78 & 137

<sup>2</sup> This is in line with David Harvey's reworking of Marxist political theory, which places the city first and foremost in terms of its position as a generator of capital accumulation as opposed to the factory/workplace. Harvey explains that "the concept of work has to shift from a narrow definition attaching to industrial forms of labor to the far broader terrain of the work entailed in the production and reproduction of an increasingly urbanized daily life" (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 138). Harvey also discusses how urbanization will play a key role in social conflicts of today.

<sup>3</sup> "Urban Class Warfare: Are Cities Built for the Rich?" *Spiegel Online*, May 21, 2013, accessed: August , 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/marxist-and-geographer-david-harvey-on-urban-development-and-power-a-900976.html>

<sup>4</sup> I. Zekeriya Ayman, "Turkey: 'Occupy Gezi' -- Istanbul's red-green uprising; Right to the City movement and the Turkish summer," *Links: International Journal of Social Renewal*, June 2, 2013, accessed July 1, 2013, <http://links.org.au/node/3373>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "In Istanbul's Heart, Leader's Obsession, Perhaps Achilles' Heel," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2013, accessed July 1, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/08/world/europe/in-istanbuls-taksim-square-an-achilles-heel.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/08/world/europe/in-istanbuls-taksim-square-an-achilles-heel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>6</sup> "The fact that in Turkey, Egypt or Tunisia an 'Islamic republic' with its own peculiarities was not born, as in Iran, is the reason for disorder and conflicts." Daniele Scalea, "From Tahrir to Taksim: the Carousel of Revolt in the Mediterranean Periphery," *The 4th Media*, June 23, 2013, accessed July 1, 2013, <http://www.4thmedia.org/2013/06/23/from-tahrir-to-taksim-the-carousel-of-revolt-in-the-mediterranean-periphery>

<sup>7</sup> Such Eurocentric prejudices had emerged over centuries, supported by the writings of leading Western thinkers/ writers. Immanuel Kant, for instance, divided humans into four racial categories, set apart from each other by differences in natural disposition. "Humanity," he writes, is "at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites." (EZE, 1997, p.47, 55 and 63) Similarly, James Mill, great British philosopher and historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a five-volume history of India to demonstrate how deficient the Indians are in governance, science, philosophy, art and technology. Today, other Western writers repeat a similar line. Niall Ferguson, for instance, asserts that without the spread of British rule, colonised people such as the Chinese and Indians would not have parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, incorrupt government and individual freedoms. (FERGUSON, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Such as Cihan Tugal's article in *New Perspectives on Turkey* (2013) and Mehmet Barış Kuymulu's piece in *City* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Efe Can Gürcan and Efe Peker, *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park*, (New York: Palgrave, 2015):24

<sup>10</sup> Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1979)

<sup>11</sup> "Interview with David Harvey: Rebel Cities and Urban Resistance Part II," *Zcommunications*, January 7, 2013, accessed August 1, 2013, available at <http://climateandcapitalism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/01/DavidHarvey-Rebel-citiesInterview.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 78

<sup>13</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 85

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<sup>14</sup> James Surowiecki, "Middle-class militants," *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2013, accessed August 1, 2013, [http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2013/07/08/130708ta\\_talk\\_surowiecki](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2013/07/08/130708ta_talk_surowiecki)

<sup>15</sup> Nadeen Shaker, "Turkish protesters reject neo-liberalism not Islamism," *Ahramonline*, June 4, 2013, accessed August 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/73116/World/Region/Interview-Turkish-protesters-reject-neoliberalism-.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> Shaker, "Turkish protesters," p. 21

<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996): 69-85

<sup>18</sup> Matt Mahon, "Interview with David Harvey," *The White Review*, May 2012, accessed August 2013, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-david-harvey>