

**THE INAPPROPRIABLE PEOPLE OF *GEZİ*:  
REFUSAL, PROTEST, DESIRE**

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# THE INAPPROPRIABLE PEOPLE OF *GEZİ*: REFUSAL, PROTEST, DESIRE

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## Abstract

At a time that direct action ever more effectively mediates political experience across the world, this dissertation, *The Inappropriate People of Gezi: Refusal, Protest, Desire*, offers insights into the empowering and transformative qualities of protest. It builds on works in contemporary and continental political theory, including Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Rancière, and takes the 2013 *Gezi* Protests of Turkey as its case to engage with questions of peoplehood, refusal, and power in popular mobilization. Working from the empirical particulars of Turkish mobilizational politics to political theory, I argue that protest presents not only a challenge to a ruling authority's sovereign claims to represent "the people," but also a non-sovereign force that refuses to react to power in power's own terms. Thus, unlike contemporary accounts, which confine protest activity to a question of identification with the popular subject and thereby mirror the political authority from below, this project develops "a politics of refusal" that evades seductions of sovereignty.

I articulate such politics by investigating how the *Gezi* protestors unsettled a set of statist binaries, including "the people" and its "other," epistemologies of sense and non-sense, civil and uncivil resistance, and the means and ends of action. Treating political practices and cultural artifacts from *Gezi* as texts of political theory in their own right, my account perceives protest as a meaning-making enterprise transforming the spaces of judgement and action within which broader publics understand and engage politics. Experimentations with new forms of thought, speech, and action in protest, I claim, generate a "collective desire" that constitutes protestors as *a people*. A 'desiring people' constituted in and through mobilization is different from a 'sovereign people' that can be claimed and *appropriated* by governmental authorities by virtue of their electoral mandate. Not reducible to an object of identification over which competing parties engage in hegemonic contestations, a people generated by a collective desire is *inappropriate*. It can only be experienced and enjoyed in practice, via collective action. This dissertation thus theorizes an "inappropriate people" as both a shared collective desire and in relation to reconfigurative praxes of refusal.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born and raised in Istanbul, Turkey. I completed my bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University. During my graduate studies at Cornell, my research has focused on democratic and critical theory, protest politics, and populist authoritarianism. Parts of my dissertation project have appeared in *Political Theory* and *Contemporary Political Theory*. I have taught courses in political theory, American politics, and the humanities at Cornell University and in New York State prisons with the Cornell Prison Education Program.

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## Introduction

### A terrorist organization of one's own

During an investigation in Ankara in August 2013, twenty-three *Gezi* protestors were taken into custody for engaging in terrorist activities. At trial, Erdal Kozan, a recent high school graduate, found out he, like the other suspects, was being charged with membership in nine different “terrorist organizations.” In response, Kozan asked the judge: “The search warrant issued for us lists nine terrorist organizations without identifying with which one we are affiliated. Are *you* going to assign, or may *we* choose the organization to our own taste?”<sup>1</sup>

The case file put together for the prosecution of these protestors was not uncommon then. Nor is it now. Like Kozan, hundreds of other *Gezi* protestors were also arrested for unspecified links to terrorist organizations. According to the General Directorate of Security records, 5513 protestors were arrested during the country-wide mobilization of 2013, which, in one estimate, included over five thousand demonstrations attended by about four million citizens in eighty of Turkey's eighty-one provinces.<sup>2</sup> Though many of these protestors were later released, a more trumpeted “*Gezi* trial” lasted from 2017 to early 2019, charging a small group of esteemed journalists, artists, businesspersons, academics, lawyers, and civil society actors for engaging in conspiratorial activities and attempting a coup against the government.<sup>3</sup>

Now, long after the 2013 *Gezi* Protests, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (*AKP*), under the leadership of now President, formerly Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, continues to use and abuse the country's “anti-terrorism law” (which preceded the party, enacted in 1991 and further amendments throughout the 1990s and 2000s) to criminalize dissent.<sup>4</sup> It does so by linking a series of political events and/or dissident activities within a purposefully ambiguous

and elusive web of illegality encompassing “domestic terror,” “civilian coup,” and “denigration of the Turkish nation, Republic of Turkey and governmental institutions and bodies.” Terror, coup, denigration, all serve today as code words for dissent in Turkey’s criminal legal system.

The elasticity of the provision on which the charges were based—Article 7/2 of the Anti-Terrorism Law: “making propaganda for a terrorist organization”—renders the *abuse* of the law inherent to its *use*. Criminalizing the exercise of freedom of opinion, expression, and assembly, the interpretation of the law essentially allows it to be applied arbitrarily to political cases across the board. For example, when presented with the fact that Turkey has a record number of journalists behind bars, government officials tend invariably to provide the same answer: *They are arrested not for their professional activities, but for their criminal terroristic activities.*<sup>5</sup> Persistent reiterations of the phrase subvert its claim by negating the very distinction it draws. Professional activities *are* “criminal” under the current order *if* the profession involves giving expression to dissenting views.

Underwritten by an instrumental indeterminacy and uncertainty, the application of the Anti-Terrorism Law, like the exercise of law more generally in Turkey, “turns out to be threatening in the way *fate* is threatening”—“uncertain and ambiguous,” to borrow from Jacques Derrida.<sup>6</sup> Under *AKP*’s increasingly authoritarian rule, criminality becomes a matter of fate floating across sites (protest,<sup>7</sup> university,<sup>8</sup> municipality,<sup>9</sup> newspaper,<sup>10</sup> public services<sup>11</sup>), signs (a flag,<sup>12</sup> a kiss,<sup>13</sup> a tweet,<sup>14</sup> a keffiyeh<sup>15</sup>), and bodies, singled out or *en masse*. The “war on terror” stretches across independent and/or unrelated events: the *Gezi* Protests in Summer 2013; an anti-corruption operation in December 2013; a peace petition signed by academics in 2016; a military coup attempt in 2016, a dissenting constitutional referendum campaign and march for justice in 2017; anti-war protests on university campuses in 2018; the modest electoral success of opposition parties in 2019.

All, and more, become pieces in a larger state-narrative: *The Turkish Republic will not surrender to the terrorists.*

As I am writing these paragraphs in February 2021, this in/famous phrase is being repeated by President Erdoğan, and other *AKP* members and the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (*MHP*) in coalition with Erdoğan's *AKP*, in response to the ongoing student and faculty protests at Boğaziçi University against the government's appointment of a party loyalist as the University president despite objections raised by the university community.<sup>16</sup> The ongoing defamation campaign against the academics of Boğaziçi, undertaken by individual and collective actors aligned with the *AKP* (including the party organization and leadership, subservient media outlets, and state-sponsored commentators on Internet, the “*AK Trolls*”), liken the protests on campus to the *Gezi* uprising, labelling both as “terrorist” activities undertaken by those who lack Turkey's “national and spiritual values.”<sup>17</sup>

To save my readers from the repetition in these state narratives, let me assert what is obvious: There is no shortage of protest in Turkey under the single-party rule of the *AKP* despite, and at the same time because of, the party's accelerating crackdown on the country's few remaining sites of civil society and democratic opposition. Also noteworthy, however, as we see in Kozan's question to the judge, is the protestors' ability to speak (back) to power with an awareness that they have been predefined by the regime as terrorists, violent militants, coup-plotters, looters, or ill-intentioned conspirators trying to hamper the country's growth and development—identifications that, once reserved for ethnic and religious minority groups, have been expanding to incorporate, as broadly as possible, the ‘opposition to the *AKP*.’<sup>18</sup> This awareness is reflected in protestors' speech acts, written or performed, which neither reject nor

accept statist discourses but instead circumvent the impasses they create: *Am I allowed to choose which terrorist organization I have served?*

Bypassing the options on offer, the protestors refuse, doing so knowing that, otherwise, their resistance will be worn down defending ‘political action’ against ‘power,’ which seeks to convict it for precisely what it is. By not playing his part in the courtroom drama, Kozan presents an off-script refusal. In not saying *I am [not] a member of these terrorist organizations*, he refuses the state’s framing—*these are the dissident citizens, and these are the terrorist organizations we have*— thus rejecting a script that reinscribes the relationship between dissent and criminality preconstrued by the state.<sup>19</sup> This dissertation theorizes a politics, which, as in this example, *refuses to react to power in power’s own terms*. It is a politics that questions the dominant and dominating systems of power, authority, knowledge, meaning, and value; and affirms instead a multiplicity of meanings, voices, and desires.

I articulate a ‘politics of refusal’ in two distinct yet related senses. One refers directly to the *Gezi* protestors’ practical-political refusal of various frameworks and standards of political rule, action, speech, sense, and worth, employed by the ruling authority, Erdoğan’s *AKP*, as well as by the extant political opposition, in particular the Kemalist old guard and the socialist Left. Refusal in the second sense is, for me, a political-theoretical problematizing of the predominant conceptual and theoretical frameworks in contemporary political thought studying protest. Informed by and thinking with the *Gezi* protestors’ refusal of statist frameworks through plural, affirmative, and generative practices, my account refuses to construe protestors as mirror images of what the current Turkish regime claims to be: “the true embodiment of the general will.”<sup>20</sup> In my view, an identification of protestors as materialized popular sovereignty would articulate yet another appropriative claim to the title of the people—a claim from below, in contrast with the

AKP government's top-down claim, to be sure, but nonetheless derivative of and in competition with it.

As I will shortly unpack, the addressees of my political-theoretical refusal are political theories and practices that remain captive to this kind of "state-thought" in their use of the state's instrumental and normative logics to articulate the meaning and significance of popular mobilization. Seeking counter-equivalent regimes of sovereignty, peoplehood, legitimacy, authority, and authorization within the site of protest, these theoretical regimes correspond to and compete with the ones deployed by extant political authorities. In doing so, I suggest, they overlook what protestors, through their own creative refusals, corporeal solidarities, affective energies, and aesthetic makings, generate: *a collective desire*.<sup>21</sup>

Turning to *materialized desires* that are enjoyed and experienced in political action, my account refuses the primacy of the interpretive lens of sovereignty, emphasizing, by contrast, that, when people participate in mass protests, popular mobilizations, festive gatherings, or informal assemblies; they make themselves part of a mobilized collectivity.<sup>22</sup> Their desires circulate, vitalize, and generate power. Through such desires, assembled crowds produce *a people* that exceeds "the people" as an electoral category. A 'desiring people' constituted in and through mobilization, I argue, is different from a 'sovereign people' that can be claimed and *appropriated* by governmental authorities by virtue of their electoral mandate. Not reducible to an object of identification over which competing parties and groups engage in hegemonic contestations, a people generated by a collective desire, I show, is *inappropriate*. It can *only* be experienced and enjoyed in practice, via collective action. On my account, a people constituted at sites of protest is a non-sovereign entity enjoying its togetherness, its immediate corporeal solidarity and its intermediating communal activities.<sup>23</sup>

By understanding a protesting people in terms of collective desire and synergetic enjoyment rather than in terms of authorization or legitimation, my project seeks to articulate a new problem-space for political theory. Understood in these terms, the *Gezi* protestors—gathered out of doors, occupying, camping, speaking, chanting, barricading, laughing, standing, dancing, reading, kissing, cleaning, exercising, learning, teaching, cooking, eating, holding and moving together—belong to an economy of desire. Such may be true, too, of other protestors around the world, whose circulating, binding, re/vitalizing, and generating power neither appropriates nor is appropriable.

### **A brief overview of the protests: “Everywhere is Taksim, resistance is everywhere”**

The *Gezi* Protests, by now discussed in a rich body of literature of its own, are remembered as many things: a watershed event, a full-fledged urban revolt, a carnivalesque episode, a desire for a new form of political expression, a hope for a different society... What the protests have come to be, however, was far from predictable. On May 28, 2013, when the police entered the *Gezi* Park, there were no more than a hundred environmental activists in the park, who had spent the night in tents to “watch over the trees” in the wake of the government’s order to demolish the public park.<sup>24</sup> The demolition order was part of a broader urban transformation project that included construction of a shopping mall and a high-end residence complex in the Taksim area where the park is located.<sup>25</sup>

Taksim, and more broadly Istanbul, had been a host of various other smaller-scale protests throughout that year, including most notably a series of demonstrations against the shutdown and demolition of the *Emek* movie theater—the oldest theater in Istanbul, historically the venue for city’s international film festivals,<sup>26</sup> which, despite widespread disapproval and public protest, became a shopping venue. For a long time, the *AKP* government’s economic agenda had been

predicated on demolishing cultural landmarks, historic neighborhoods, and open public spaces to make room for profitable real estate ventures and massive construction projects.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, the *AKP*'s brand of neoliberal developmentalism had been secured by a set of authoritarian measures, such as rule by decree, "concentration of power, lack of transparency and accountability, criminalization of dissent," and significant restrictions on freedom of speech, the press, and access to the Internet.<sup>28</sup>

The government's demolition project at *Gezi* was disrupted, first, by a small but motivated group of activists, and then by an outspoken member of parliament representing the second electoral district of Istanbul that includes Taksim, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a member of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*BDP*). The initial small sit-in at the Park attracted a larger crowd the next day when some actors, artists, and authors joined while Erdoğan spoke on TV about the government's recent regulation of alcohol sales. In retrospect, the timing of Erdoğan's ostensibly anti-secular speech was consequential, adding fuel to the flame of his previous public endorsements of fostering a "pious generation,"<sup>29</sup> criminalizing abortion,<sup>30</sup> and claiming homosexuality as "a disease,"<sup>31</sup> coupled with local governmental efforts to protect "public morality," which had sparked a series of innovative protests, from a public "kiss protest" by couples at Ankara's subway stations to campaigns by queer activist organizations asking "whose morality is public morality."<sup>32</sup>

The turning point at *Gezi* was the 5am police raid on May 31 which continued throughout the day and produced the first iconic images of police brutality, including the "woman in red" being sprayed with teargas by a riot policeman.<sup>33</sup> The image, widely shared on the social media in the absence of any coverage by Turkish newspapers or television channels, quickly became the symbol and accelerator of the emergent movement. The number of protestors in the Park multiplied

within a matter of hours while the Istanbul metropolitan municipality shut down all roads leading to Taksim Square and cancelled subway and ferry operations in the city. Over the next few days, thousands poured into the streets, not only in Istanbul but in multiple urban centers, including Ankara, Izmir, Antalya, Adana, Tunceli, Rize, Mersin, Konya, Rize, and Trabzon. *Gezi*'s defining slogan was coined during these first few days of the protests: *Everywhere is Taksim, resistance is everywhere*. The slogan appeared in chants, songs, poems, tweets, and street graffiti for the rest of the summer.

The police violated human rights on an alarmingly massive scale, using water cannons, teargas, live ammunition, plastic bullets, and beating, as has been investigated by manifold local and international human rights organizations.<sup>34</sup> According to the Turkish Doctors' Association reports, eight people lost their lives as a result of police attacks; more than eight thousand people were injured; 104 with serious head injuries and 11 losing an eye to plastic bullets. The government's attempts to repress the mobilization, however, worked only to spread and escalate social turmoil, pulling the 'dissident half' of the population—alienated, belittled, and outraged—into the streets for weeks to come.<sup>35</sup>

On June 1, when no single neighborhood of Istanbul was off limits to the uprising, Erdoğan addressed the public in another defiant speech, proclaiming "*police were there [Taksim Square] yesterday; are there today, and will be there tomorrow,*" before vowing that they would restore public order and ensure people's safety and property.<sup>36</sup> Not heeding Erdoğan's comments, major hotels, local stores, and restaurants opened their doors to injured protestors, while voluntary doctors set up mobile hospitals. Soccer clubs called their fans to protest, and they soon started throwing tear gas canisters back at the police. About forty thousand people marched across the Bosphorus Bridge from the Asian to the European side of the city in an effort to arrive at Taksim



on foot. Erdoğan responded: “If this is about staging a protest, about a social movement, I would ... gather 200,000 where they gather 20, and where they gather 100,000, I would gather 1 million party supporters.”<sup>37</sup>

By early June, at any hour of the day, Istanbul was physically reverberating with millions of citizens banging pots and pans out of doors. University classes were informally suspended; final exams were postponed. Young professionals acquired a new habit of preparing a protest kit—a pair of running shoes, a gasmask, and a bottle of milk for teargas protection—before leaving home in the morning so that they could join the protests directly after work. While clashes between police and protestors continued everywhere else, police were withdrawn from the *Gezi* Park by an unexpected order. For the two weeks that the Park remained outside state control, a new commune-like collective life took form.<sup>38</sup>

A stage to live artistic performances, piano concerts, dance recitals, collective yoga sessions, and feminist workshops, the Park became the most carnivalesque of all protest sites. It had its own library, daily paper, a common kitchen, a scheduled cleaning routine, a permaculture vegetable garden, multiple forum areas, and a medical care center, all managed collectively and voluntarily. The *Gezi* Resistance, in virtual interaction with the rest of the country—and even with protestors in distant lands<sup>39</sup>—produced unique forms of political expression, praxes of refusal, and cooperative sociality, which together brought into being a collective desire that transformed, and generated anew, political subjectivities. Meanwhile, humor, creativity and playfulness permeated every location to which the popular mobilization had spread. These permeations continue to constitute the backbone of most analyses of *Gezi*.<sup>40</sup>

This project offers a political and political theoretical account of what I have learned from *Gezi*’s creative resistance, that is from the political events, practices, and actors that I take as the

subjects of my research. It does not intend to provide a comprehensive empirical account of the resistance—why the protests happened, what happened, where and when it happened—though, I engage some of these questions. Across the chapters, I work from the ground up, from within the empirical particularities of *Gezi* in order to engage critically with questions of peoplehood, refusal, and power in political protest through a cross-interpretation of scholarly works in democratic theory alongside the empirical material I collected while conducting fieldwork in Istanbul and Ankara between 2016 and 2018. My archive includes interviews and participant observation, notes on public deliberations in neighborhood forums, iconic images and slogans that shaped popular debates and discourses, video performances, and news media from 2013 to the present. The following sections locate the project conceptually and theoretically and articulate its main arguments before providing an outline of the chapters.

### **From sovereign entitlement to a collective desire**

This project developed in the context of the wave of mass protests of the past decade. The wave includes Occupy movements across the world, including “Occupy Wall Street” (OWS) and anti-austerity mobilizations in Europe, the Arab Spring, the *Gezi* Protests of Turkey, and the simultaneous protests in Brazil, as well as Black Lives Matter Protests taking place since 2014 in the U.S. As these events unfolded, there has been a renewed interest among democratic theorists in conceptualizing popular mobilization and “the people,” with contemporary Anglo-American and continental political theory converging in what I call a ‘sovereignty-centric’ approach to the study of protest movements.<sup>41</sup> This approach treats popular mobilization as a hegemonic contestation among competing claims to “the people” and protestors as a constituent power, acting with a common will and direction, against the constituted power of the political authority.

Protest, from this perspective, manifests a reenactment of popular sovereignty in the streets and squares, exposing the failure of a political authority to represent “the people,” a failure that is often referred to as a crisis of representation.<sup>42</sup> The diagnosis of a representational crisis and emphases on “peoplehood” and “sovereignty” prevalent in political theory reflect, to a considerable extent, self-understandings of the crowds that were mobilized in public space. In other words, sovereignty-centric accounts were largely in synch with how mass mobilizations defined themselves. At times self-identified as the 99%, at other times verified by zoomed in and zoomed out images, mobilized masses exposed the gap between elected public authorities and the popular assemblies formed out of doors, making a distinction between “we, the people” and “*they* [who] don’t represent us”—chants that became the symbol of popular and populist politics.<sup>43</sup>

For example, when Hosni Mubarak's once unshakeable autocratic rule came close to its eventual downfall, the regime, in a last-ditch effort, claimed that the crowds filling the streets were not authentic Egyptians, but a group of sinister provocateurs from abroad conspiring to “destroy Egypt.”<sup>44</sup> In response, crowds asked cameras to ‘zoom in’ and show that *they were Egyptian people* and to ‘zoom out’ and capture the thousands—more than a small group—of protestors taking over Tahrir. Once deemed exemplary of mass movements by Walter Benjamin, the politics of the image and visibility was indeed the dominant mode in which politics was understood and experienced.<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, during the anti-austerity protests of Southern Europe and OWS of the United States, protestors formed popular assemblies, experimenting with alternative “decision-making procedures and organizational structures,” which they claimed to be *standing for something larger than themselves*—a “99% whose lives are essentially left out of the equation” of “the people.”<sup>46</sup>

Contextual differences across the global wave of mass protests notwithstanding, “the people,” uttered in different words and forms, has also become the dominant analytical category

structuring critical reflections in contemporary political theory. In a recent work, for example, Judith Butler articulates incipient forms of “popular sovereignty” emergent from within informal assemblies of Tahrir, *Gezi*, and various other Occupy movements. By way of an assembling of bodies, and through collective voice or silence, movement or stillness, protesting masses, on Butler’s account, constitute “the people”—an extra-parliamentary power that “holds final legitimating power under conditions of democratic rule.”<sup>47</sup> In moments of assembling, which Butler, drawing on Jason Frank’s work, calls “constituent moments,” protestors engage in acts of “self-making or self-constitution” by invoking the phrase “we, the people,” at times by actually uttering or writing it, at other times through their sheer bodily presence.<sup>48</sup> By constituting themselves as “the people,” protestors enact “popular sovereignty,” the self-authorized and authorizing power of the people, separate from the representative bodies they legitimate, that is, “state sovereignty.”<sup>49</sup> Understood in these terms, the invocation of peoplehood becomes the very force that brings out into the open the distinction between “popular sovereignty” and “state sovereignty.”

Others, such as Chantal Mouffe, interpret mass protests in terms of a “populist moment” reclaiming popular sovereignty—the “backbone of the democratic ideal”—against its effacement by a (neo)liberal consensus permeating both political life and political theory.<sup>50</sup> Strategically, as much as reflectively, theorists of populism, following as well Ernesto Laclau’s influential work, *On Populist Reason*, understand protest movements as opportunities to draw a political frontier between the popular sectors and the elite (or establishment) against the backdrop of the depoliticizing/oligarchizing forces of financial capitalism and technocratic managerialism. Assembled masses, from this perspective, (ought to) unite a variety of grievances and unfulfilled demands in a “chain of equivalence” around a collective will and in defense of socio-economic

and political equality.<sup>51</sup> Theorists of the *populist moment*, like Butler's *constituent moment*, theorize the "collective assembling of bodies" in protest as "an exercise of the popular will," which speaks for and on behalf of "the people" it claims to represent.<sup>52</sup>

The sovereignty-centric interpretive lens of globally circulating theories parallels the popular discourses, terminologies, signs, and symbolisms that political actors themselves, collectively and individually, employ. Implicit, for example, in the framing of 99% versus 1%, which expanded its popularity beyond the U.S., was the belief that broad swaths of populations were building heterogenous alliances against narrow elite formations. Bodily multiplicities in the public space at *Gezi*, Tahrir, Puerto del Sol, Syntagma, Wall Street, observed, engaged, and/or joined by activist-scholars, have also re/valorized the principle of popular sovereignty in democratic theory, severing the concept's ties with the state and institutional bodies that mediate the people's will in order to relocate it at the site of informal, extra-institutional, bodily assemblies.

Similarly, a large majority of vernacular scholarly and popular reflections on the *Gezi* Protests also center around the theme collective assemblages. Fascinated with the heterogeneity of the oppositional alliance, most reflections at once underscore and subsume exoterically identifiable differences among protestors under a united popular front. In the most sympathetic reviews, *Gezi* is celebrated for bringing together diverse segments of society—which would be given the name the "*Gezi Spirit*"—as an act of counter-sovereignty challenging *AKP*'s hegemony.

For example, in their introduction to an edited volume '*Everywhere Taksim*': *Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi*, Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış present *Gezi* as a "platform for unification of antagonistic groups, such as LGBTI, Islamists, headscarved women, Kemalists, feminists, Alevis and Kurds" and thus a "turning point for *overcoming* Turkey's deep cleavages."<sup>53</sup> As part of another comprehensive and influential edited volume, *Another Brick in the Barricade*:

*The Gezi Resistance and its Aftermath*, the co-editor, Güneş Koç, attributes the success of the *Gezi* protestors to their ability to create “common denominators” with the help of which they “pushed [their] disagreements and discrepancies into the background.”<sup>54</sup> Like David and Toktamış, Koç celebrates how, during *Gezi*, various “disagreements and discrepancies had been ‘overcome’ or had become ‘endurable,’”<sup>55</sup> transforming the “masses” or the “multitude” into an entity to be “named as ‘the people.’”<sup>56</sup> *Gezi*, on these accounts, presented a counter-hegemonic manifestation of popular sovereignty, replacing the *AKP*’s majoritarian regime of legitimacy with its own created and creative regime which prioritizes heterogeneity and bodily public presence over quantifiable count.<sup>57</sup>

Evidenced in various interviews conducted with participants of the protests, the coexistence of diverse groups in an oppositional alliance—without a particular party or movement dominating the public space—has widely been deemed the most praiseworthy aspect of the mobilization.<sup>58</sup> Such popular praise has prompted most political theorists, native and foreign, to construe the protests as formative of an “equivalential chain” among multiple unfulfilled demands and sources of “discontent against the growing authoritarianism of the *AKP*, against conservative interventions into people’s lifestyles and choices, against neoliberal greed, against rampant commodification, against the denial of ethnic and religious identities (mainly of Kurds and Alevis), against nepotism and partisanship, against the censoring of the media, against police violence, against the use of the judiciary to criminalize all sorts of dissent and so on and so forth.”<sup>59</sup>

In this logic of equivalence, as argued by Zeynep Gambetti as well as Ayşem Mert, the *Gezi* Park worked as an “empty signifier,” in Laclau and Mouffe’s sense, at once standing for broader struggles, demands, and grievances listed above; unifying previously antagonistic groups around the shared Spirit; and forming “a dichotomic frontier [...] between these groups and the

government.”<sup>60</sup> According to others, like Hayriye Özen, the “*Gezi*” signifier in fact “came to represent not only the initial protestors, but a much wider social sector—that is, the underdog against the governing power—in the dichotomy established between the two.”<sup>61</sup> Unified against the common “adversary,” namely, the governing power (“state sovereignty” in Butler’s terms), protesting masses turned a plurality of links “into a singularity through the constitution of a popular identity,” that is, “anti-government populism.”<sup>62</sup> Consonant with these vernacular accounts, Butler writes (in a foreword to another early edited volume put together by scholars from Turkey) of the “mixed and expansive crowd” at *Gezi* as an entity which constituted itself as “the people,” while noting as well that the contest over the question “who represents the Turkish people” is “hardly over.”<sup>63</sup>

All these theoretical accounts demonstrate that, albeit unfinished and transient, and/or unsettled and open to negotiation, the *Gezi* Uprising—similar to other amassing dissidents around the world—symbolized a *populism from below*, representing the voice of the people against institutional structures marked by rampant political and/or economic inequality as well as an elite, both national and transnational, which has grown distant from the fears, worries, hopes, and aspirations of ordinary people. In this regime of representation, the alliances, solidarism, and collective agency of protestors have appeared as a claim to popular will that is antipodal to the one the *AKP* government advanced in virtue of its electoral mandate. That is, the informal popular assemblies in the streets were a counter-hegemonic undoing of *AKP*’s exclusive and exclusionary claim to general will, i.e., its majoritarian ballot-box supremacy logic.

Ultimately, both globally circulating theories of the constituent power of “the people” and vernacular accounts of *Gezi*, largely in synch with on-the-ground popular commentaries, understood the meaning and significance of protest in terms of an entitlement to popular

subjectivity, while treating that entitlement as temporary, contingent, and contested. Such interpretative frameworks relocate popular will away from representative bodies into the streets and the assembly—the new site of democratic authorization and legitimation. In doing so, we should notice, they equate the political agency of a protesting collectivity to a popular identity.

Bernard Harcourt, skeptical of radical democratic theory's investments in "the idea of the popular will," questions whether the mere "fact of assembly and sharing the street" can stand in and speak for "the people," especially for those who are not there.<sup>64</sup> While Harcourt's skepticism calls for an evaluation of how "broad, numerous, and diverse" the assembly is in order to assess the "significance of protest," my skepticism, by contrast, concerns the attempt to assign a sovereign claim and entitlement to a part of the population in the first place.<sup>65</sup> By understanding the streets as a site of authorization, I contend, predominant democratic theories ascribe to protestors a "privileged normative status," and this, I argue, assigns to them the place of "the people" implicitly at the expense of different sides of the electorate.<sup>66</sup>

To be clear, I do not disagree that protestors, at *Gezi* and elsewhere, by virtue of their mobilization, organization, and presence out of doors, pose a challenge to the elected authority's claim to represent "the people." Indeed, the acknowledgment of such a challenge is particularly important in a place like Turkey, where the governing party, with its distinctly majoritarian brand of populism, rules essentially by decree to implement a mythologized popular will—invoked often by Erdoğan in order to use his electoral mandate as a license to be unrestrained when carrying out what the people supposedly want.<sup>67</sup> However, I also want to caution against elaborating *Gezi only* in these terms—sovereignty, will, legitimacy, and authority—for such elaborations, in my view, risk mirroring *AKP's* authority from below. Tending to replace one identificatory and possessive claim to the "the people," exhibited by the current government, with another, dissident, insurgent,



and incipient, such theoretical enterprises, invested in sovereign makings, are susceptible to certain idealization of protesting groups disavowing the perils of unity-oriented political practice and unification-focused political theory.

I also worry that the question ‘who identifies with, stands for, or speaks on behalf of *the people*’ is not only inherently unresolvable but also theoretically problematic, because it seems to locate the social capacities, affective forces, and transformative energies brought into being by mobilization in a possessive sovereign entitlement. As political categories like popular sovereignty/will and unity/unification set the coordinates of contemporary debates in democratic theory, protest comes to be understood, almost exhaustively, as a corrective and constituent moment, righting a wrong. This kind of theoretical configuration, on one hand, tends to treat disagreement and conflict as obstacles to be ‘overcome’ or ‘endured’ on the way to an otherwise reassuring voice of a united front; and, on the other hand, misses the surplus protest produces. What I refer to as surplus is a collective desire that materializes in and circulates across dissenting activities, places, signs, and bodies. Such materialized and circulating desire is predicated not on a unified will or hegemonic claim but on plural modes of thinking, sociality, affectivity, creativity, imagination, and engagement. To study this irreducible surplus quality—*Gezi*’s collective desire—I work with the empirical specificities of *Gezi* with and against globally circulating theories. And, I take a step back to ask: What is shared between people in the streets?

Many answers could be given to this question for *Gezi*. Protestors, gathered in the streets and squares, share an unhappiness with the world as it is, and a refusal of the options offered to them. Standing, moving, and chanting together, in the face of state violence, they share a corporeal solidarity. They also share a turbulence of feelings—perhaps rage, discontent, courage, joy, or hope. At times, they participate in communal activities; they share collective commitments to

collaboration, cooperation, and mutual aid. They share the responsibility of carrying out those commitments. At other times, they care for and learn from one another. On the basis of and through these experiences and practices, discussed across the following chapters, the *Gezi* protestors, I argue, generated and were generated by a collective desire. On my account, it is this collective desire—not hegemonic claims or sovereign imaginations—that constituted them as *a people*.

I also claim that the *Gezi* protestors derived their power from their desire for their own togetherness, their capacity to act collectively and to author the accounts of what they were doing. This understanding of power cannot be cast as a legitimate and legitimating source of democratic authority. It is also irreducible to an ability to claim peoplehood at the expense of different sides of an electorate, such as the side aligned with the *AKP*. Instead, the popular power of *Gezi*, as I see it, had its source in itself—it was brought into being by the protestors’ own creative praxes of refusal, and their belonging to and desire for a space of their own making. Not a site of hegemonic contestation over “the people,” this space was a site of experimentation with new forms of thought, speech, and action captured neither by statist discourses or by discourses that resist the state by using its terms. The interpretive framework I offer, therefore, foregrounds the making of a collective desire through praxes of refusal seeking to reconfigure politics in ways that are unbounded by statist imaginaries and vocabularies.

Wendy Brown has defined political theory as a “meaning-making enterprise” that “recodes and rearranges the meanings to reveal something about the meanings and incoherencies that we live with.”<sup>68</sup> Not unlike political theory, dissident political practices—whether in the form of vocalized or written speech, communal activities, festive performances, or visual and spatial constructs—generate new meanings, too. In doing so, they transform spaces of judgement and action within which publics understand and engage politics. Inciting thought, imagination, and

desire, they reshape the topography of political experience. My project turns to instances of such incitement, listening to what protestors and broader publics say without assigning them readily available, globally applied categories of political theory.

I should also note that, by disavowing sovereignty-centric analyses of protest, my intention is not to emphasize the “horizontal” or “prefigurative” character of new protest movements—though, I am sympathetic to such emphases.<sup>69</sup> Instead, I want to problematize the concept and praxis of sovereign orientations in scholarly debates as well as in on-the-ground popular practices and discourses at *Gezi* by putting theory and praxis into a mutually illuminating and challenging conversation. In his analysis of the image-worlds of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, W.J.T. Mitchell, for example, underscores the crowds’ insistence on “anti-iconic” image repertoires that resisted any “representative *face* come forward as the avatar of the revolution.”<sup>70</sup> Replacing the “face and figure of the charismatic leader” with anonymous crowds, these protests, in Mitchell’s view, worked effectively to activate “nonsovereign” political imaginations prioritizing “space” over “face,” i.e., the occupation (space) over any individual (face) partaking in it.<sup>71</sup> The absence of prominent individual revolutionary figures prompts Mitchell to describe the spirit of the protest movements as anti-iconic and thus *non-sovereign*.

Although Mitchell’s observations about the absence of centralized leadership and charismatic imagery are well taken, his analysis is nonetheless too quick to equate a “leaderless” protest with a “nonsovereign” politics. In my view, just as vertically organized social movements with their charismatic leaders are an emblem of sovereign politics, so, too, can horizontally assembled leaderless mobilizations be. As we have just seen, most reflections on *Gezi*, offered by both political theorists and political practitioners in the field, point precisely to this latter form of sovereign makings—horizontal, spontaneous, and decentralized. Indeed, a large body of radical

democratic theory literature, from Judith Butler to Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, through constituent and populist moment accounts, understands informal assemblies as expressions of popular sovereignty shaping “our conception of the will of the people.”<sup>72</sup> This kind of sovereign orientation in political theory (and its parallels in political life) is what my project seeks to destabilize in order to bring to light what goes unnoticed—intermediating and reconfigurative protest practices on the ground.

Curiously enough, this large body of democratic theory does not extend the representative claim, sovereign power, or democratic will that it readily grants to *Gezi*, and the likes of *Gezi* around the world, to “other” peoples mobilized in support of ruling parties and leaders and/or around right-wing political sentiments. The selective application of sovereignty-centric interpretations—despite their efforts to retain contestation as a constitutive element of peoplehood—is telling. It hints at an underlying normativity pervasive across conceptualizations of popular mobilization in radical democratic theory. One could perhaps ask, in the wake of right-wing and White supremacist mobilizations, whether democratic theorists were a little quick to celebrate people’s reclaimed sovereignty emerging from within insurgent mobilizations.

To be fair, the rise of right-wing populism, in some respects, temporarily followed the wave of left-leaning and liberal mobilizations—with Brazil, India, the U.S., and the Philippines electing their newfound populist authoritarian administrations and other extant populist leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán growing gradually more outspoken about their appreciation of “illiberal democracy.”<sup>73</sup> Also importantly, only more recently, some of these administrations have been borrowing from protest politics to orchestrate their own mass mobilizations when opportunities emerge. For example, in an inversion of power and resistance, recent world-wide anti-lockdown protests during the Covid-19 pandemic and the January 6 Capitol attack in the U.S., call for careful

engagement with the intersections of “populism in the streets” and “populism in power” that frustrate analytical distinctions previously drawn between these two forms or meanings of populism.<sup>74</sup> Such intersections blur the lines between popular sovereignty and state sovereignty, dissent and allegiance, from-below and top-down mobilizations, thus destabilizing normative coordinates of “the people.” It is still too soon to tell how democratic theorists will navigate these destabilizations, but the theoretical frameworks developed in the early 2010s are likely to face challenges in accommodating the rise of a new mobilizational, and in some ways from-below, authoritarian-populism.

This dissertation, in its first two chapters, offers a modest first step in a theoretical enterprise capable of navigating dilemmas of peoplehood in the wake of right-wing and authoritarian mobilizations. After investigating in the first chapter the concept and praxis of sovereign orientations in scholarly and popular debates around *Gezi*, the second chapter turns to another popular mobilization from Turkey: the 2016 Democracy Watches. This time the mobilization was not against, but in support of the *AKP* government. In fact, it was designed, directed, and funded by the party organization of the *AKP* following a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. These pro-regime mass gatherings involved persistent attacks on *Gezi* while also imitating *Gezi*’s discursive, visual, and performative constructions. Attending to simultaneous reprisals and competitive replications of *Gezi*, I treat the orchestration of the Democracy Watches as the *AKP* regime’s answer to *Gezi* and suggest that it produced, for *AKP*’s constituencies, what the *Gezi* protestors had experienced and enjoyed: a collective desire, joy, and enjoyment. The Watches produced a collective desire by setting the stage (both literally and symbolically) for a reciprocal exchange between the party and its electorate that achieved pride and elation through the creation of a popular front and by bonding *AKP* voters with the party and also with *one another*.

Turkey's Democracy Watches, along with other proliferating pro-regime mobilizations around the world, bring into view that, despite their electorally mandated popular power, populist parties and leaders in government do not have access to and cannot offer to their constituencies the kinds of affective, aesthetic, and social makings that are achieved through collective action. Mobilizations like *Gezi*, in contrast, produce a unique, inappropriable, surplus—a collective desire and a sense of peoplehood.<sup>75</sup> The only way to deal with that surplus is to re/produce it, just as Erdoğan sought to do through the Democracy Watches. My juxtaposition of *Gezi* with the Watches, therefore, aims to substantiate my claim that the “people of *Gezi*” exceeds both the “electoral people” upon which the *AKP* institutes its legitimacy as well as the “sovereign people” democratic theorists find at sites of protest and resistance. This figure of the people, my remaining chapters demonstrate, does not draw its power from an authoritative and appropriative claim to popular will or sovereignty at the expense of the “other” side of the electorate, but from its own togetherness and solidarism.

### **Play, laughter, and refusal**

When dissenters in Turkey took to the streets, they also “took to the walls of the city” in an effort to “express their mounting discontent, and claim the urban landscape as a site of participatory democratic encounter.”<sup>76</sup> Every surface area, from walls and pavements to billboards and bus stops became canvases for political street art—an aesthetic intervention into delimitations of the visible and invisible, permissible and impermissible, proper and improper in spatiotemporal arrangements.<sup>77</sup> The *Gezi* uprising, as Tijen Tunalı points out, was “not only the largest grassroots political resistance in the history of modern Turkey,” but also “the largest and most diverse *aesthetic rebellion*.”<sup>78</sup> Photographed, shared, and circulated across material and digital media, protestors’ aesthetic interventions worked as a meaning-making enterprise, in Brown’s phrase,

transforming conceptions of politics, polity, rule, and dissent. The aesthetics of *Gezi* recoded and rearranged meanings, first and foremost, by refusing captivity to the dominant governmental languages and imperatives they resisted.

All of the chapters of this dissertation study, to different extents, circulating narratives, terms, images, and symbols employed by protestors as well as by broader publics, academics, and/or state officials. This is because these discursive and aesthetic tools are containers of perceptions, interpretations, judgements, feelings. They simultaneously represent and produce the ways in which we make sense of political events, how we act and relate, and what we imagine or desire. As we will see, the *Gezi* protestors were able to act in autogenetic and self-affirming ways insofar as they circumvented political authorities' strategies to contain and control the resistance. They did so by constituting themselves not merely in oppositional, but also, and in my view more often, in appositional terms, which is to say that rather than emulating or defending themselves *against* the authority, protestors more often engaged *with* one another through playful and poetic aesthetics, collaborative mutuality, and joyful affection (Figure 1). Their repertoires of action, speech, and performance were inspired by quotidian, experiential, and embodied dimensions of collective life. The new public spaces they created were accessible and welcoming to curious observers, first-time activists, and skeptics.

In these spaces, protestors, in particular the youth, developed a new politics that was empowering, not stratifying or hierarchizing; liberating not enclosing; experimental not reifying; fluid, not predetermined; witty, not pedantic; daring, not defensive; desiring, playful and poetic, not instrumental, normative, or possessive. Protestors spoke up against the authoritarian, neoliberal, paternal, and patriarchal policies of the *AKP* government by speaking up for and from the world they had built—the world that contained their own political and desiring engagements.

They thus not only resisted but also substituted those aspects of ordinary politics and life which, in Lisa Wedeen's words, were "no longer do[ing] affirming work for" for larger segments of society.<sup>79</sup> Focusing on affirming work, this dissertation shows how the *Gezi* protestors experienced and exhibited their power in ways that neither parallel nor diametrically oppose but differ from the ways in which the governing *AKP* established and continues to establish its political authority and legitimacy.

For instance, dissidents at *Gezi* responded to Erdoğan's assertions that his party represents and belongs to "ordinary people," by maintaining, in Ankara-dialect, "*Korkma la, biziz, halk*" (Figure 2), roughly translated as "Dude, don't be scared; it's us, the people," reminding Erdoğan that they, too, were ordinary people (in Turkish, "*halk*"). And, playing on the Turkish pronunciation of "*halk*" as "Hulk," they presented themselves as the Marvel character the "Incredible *Hulk*." Beyond these playful self-reinsertions as "ordinary people," which did not aspire to but rather criticized the appropriating the title of "the people," protestors largely refrained from engaging the *AKP*'s possessive discourse of belonging.

On the contrary, their language mocked and exposed the fraught nature of Erdoğan's claims. As Benjamin McKean, in conversation with Stanley Cavell, suggests, populist leaders, by claiming to speak for "ordinary people," find themselves in a rather "uncanny" situation, for "truly ordinary things don't emphasize their own ordinariness—they just *are* ordinary."<sup>80</sup> In the face of this apparent paradox of *AKP*'s populist politics, rather than seeking to replace the party's exclusive and exclusionary claim to "ordinary people" with another, more, say, authentic, claim, *Gezi*'s refusal, as we see in the *halk*-slogans, was more provocative than anything else, a challenge to *AKP*'s claim to act on behalf of "the people," given that it seemed to be "scared" of the people taking to the streets.



As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, protestors' counter-narratives manifested what Jacques Rancière calls a polemical scene of dissensus—"politics"—that interrupted not only Erdoğan's authority, but also the multicentric authorities of the extant political scene, or the "*police*."<sup>81</sup> *Gezi*, I will show, was an example of political disruption by way of disagreement over Erdoğan's monopolistic claim to knowledge and governance as well as over the content of those claims; how dissident activities were coded, labelled, classified, and managed by the *AKP* government; and how opposition to political authority had been articulated, mediated, and voiced by previous dissident repertoires.

First, with an awareness that democratic politics involves more than a deference to the winners of the electoral game, the *Gezi* protestors transgressed the boundaries the governmental authority had drawn for them: what they could demand; where they could stand, for how long and with what authority; and how they could ultimately lead their lives. Second, among other distinct modes of engagement, protestors employed *subversive* strategies, unsettling the normative and instrumental grounds of the state's regimes of devaluation, disparagement, and containment. They refused to operate within the terms the state—or rather, using Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's words, "state-thought"—imposed upon them.<sup>82</sup> And third, offering a new language, unruly, unconventional, and unapologetic, protestors questioned the nationalist, secularist, modernist, disciplinary, marginalizing, and polarizing reflexes of previous mobilizations.

In all three dimensions, protestors were at risk of being labelled as extremist, ill-intentioned, violent, and/or as unworthy of attention—a "chorus of naysayers" or "a few looters."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the *AKP* government's response to *Gezi*, to this day, has been either demonization of protestors with conspiratorial narratives or belittlement of their rational, political, and deliberative capacities—a strategy that is not necessarily internally coherent.<sup>84</sup> In this context, *Gezi*'s politics

of refusal demonstrated protestors' ability to affirm their agency while questioning, criticizing, destabilizing, and denormalizing the field of political action. It engaged broader publics in political debates about aspects of everyday life and collective action, while reconstituting the terms and terrain of dissident politics. Beyond a refusal of an "assigned role or designated place on the already existing lands," *Gezi* became a collective demand for and enactment of *a new horizon of political intelligibility that is not captured by state-thought*.<sup>85</sup>

In other words, I understand the *Gezi* protestors as aligned with Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house": to change the political setting, one needs to resist against not only the master, but the tools that underwrite the institution of mastery.<sup>86</sup> One might perhaps suggest that the oppressed could seek to use their masters' tools more effectively, more dexterously than the masters themselves. Would that, then, make a case for the equality of the oppressed and the oppressor? Would it establish for the oppressed the right to participate in ruling as much as in being ruled? It might. With some degree of oversimplification, this is how I hear Rancière's theory of political subjectivation through dissensus. Though an ability to use masters' tools—language, reasoning, legitimation—against masters themselves certainly carries emancipatory potential, protests around the world show that this is not always the path taken, perhaps for the reasons Lorde had in mind. My account, accordingly, investigates those instances at *Gezi* where new tools were invented in order to make away with the conditions that allow for masters to exist.

In *Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam, adapting from Stuart Hall's work, develops a "low theory" that grows out of a penumbra of knowing and not knowing.<sup>87</sup> Away from "serious" and "rigorous" postures, the alternative "ways of inhabiting the structures of knowing" Halberstam explores are rather disqualified, discarded, deemed nonsensical and nonconceptual.<sup>88</sup> Similar to

Foucault's notion of "subjugated knowledges," these alternative forms are considered naïve and hierarchically inferior, flying below the erudition of "all-encompassing and global theories."<sup>89</sup> And yet, precisely for this reason, they are apt to circumvent the usual divisions between a "more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing," between high theories and practical, undisciplined, modes of knowing.<sup>90</sup> This circumvention is key to subversion, refusing the retreat to abstract normative principles and ideals, in favor of more nuanced, thus messy, local knowledge practices in touch with on-the-ground popular grievances, demands, and struggles.

The archive I draw from *Gezi*—video performances, slogans, street art, public deliberations in assemblies, and popular debates—similarly relies on vernacular, non-monumental, at times enigmatic, ludicrous, or comical, repertoires altering the modes of engagement expected of and/or demanded from political actors in Turkey and elsewhere. The common appearance of apoliticality or disinterestedness pervasive in these repertoires was, in my view, no coincidence. While the politics-as-usual, underwritten by social and epistemic hierarchies and governmental paternalism, denied deliberative capacities to large segments of society, in particular the young and unaffiliated, the dissident response uncoincidentally refused to use capacities that had been denied to them.

With that in mind, I open the third chapter of this dissertation with a slogan from *Gezi*, "Down with some things," the most popular of all slogans protestors coined and disseminated. Unlike accustomed forms of political speech, this slogan, with its exemplary non-hegemonic syntax and meaning, had the conceptually ambiguous, "insufficiently elaborated," "hierarchically inferior," and even "naïve" appearance characteristic of "subjugated knowledges."<sup>91</sup> Also unlike subjugated forms of knowledge "disqualified, rendered nonsensical or nonconceptual" by grand theories and narratives, however, the discursive repertoires of *Gezi*, I argue in Chapter 3, were rather *self-subjugating*, knowingly frustrating the expectations of formalization, systematization,

excellence, and rigor.<sup>92</sup> For example, having been denied political knowledge and reasoning by a range of political camps on the Left and Right, the youth at *Gezi*, I show, used the resources of their exclusion—their own material-cultural world, popular, entertaining, and unserious—to reclaim their voice in politics. Throwing away all scripts, protestors replaced the serious face of Left politics, the romance of revolution, and the jeremiad of rebellion with a festive, joyous, and playful politics of refusal. Wanting to be done with (only?) some things, (some) protestors were *choosing to appear* in absolute indifference to—albeit in full awareness of—the unprecedented character of their ongoing mobilization, which attracted broad participation even without significant support from political parties or organizations.

With civility, dignity, and good intentions denied to them, the protestors refused to defend themselves by adhering to the normative and instrumental imperatives that structured conventional narratives about il/legitimate and in/effective protests. As we will see in Chapter 4, when vilified by state authorities for destroying public property, protestors did not always seek to reason with the state or the public by, say, citing prevalent state violence. Instead, protestors sometimes simply bypassed the state's distinction between civil and uncivil or peaceful and violent protest, speaking past the state to an audience that could be persuaded to forgo the distinction. The video clip I analyze in this chapter is exemplary of such speaking-past-the-state. The clip, released on *Youtube*, features a group of protestors from Ankara explaining why they were breaking the city's billboards. Individual protestors in the clip, we will see, offer a series of unexpected answers to this question, such as “to see life from a new point of view” or “not to cast shadow on the police.”<sup>93</sup> I will not argue that the kinds of (non)reasonings advanced in the clip (enigmatic, irreverent, incongruous, playful, humorous, at times illegible or apolitical) are representative of the *entire* protesting body. Far from that, different protestors employed diverse strategies and tactics with

overlapping as well as distinct objectives and motives. But I will argue that the *multiplicity* of meanings and outlooks the clip performs was precisely what the statist frame, with its reductive “peaceful *versus* violent” dichotomy, was seeking to efface. Against the backdrop of such attempted effacing, I also argue, humor, illegibility, and playful apoliticality provided protestors a means for resisting the state’s familiar yet also wearying categories and orderings. Using these means, protestors disinvested from the statist rules of engagement, which also meant, using Erica Weiss’ words, an “affirmative investment in another possibility.”<sup>94</sup>

In a different context, Harney and Moten describe abolitionist politics, not as an attempt to abolish prisons but, more fundamentally, as the abolition of a society that needs prisons, i.e. the social conditions that generate, sustain, and rely on prisons.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, in their poignant introduction to the *Undercommons*, Halberstam inaugurates decolonial politics with abolishing the “standpoint from which colonialism makes sense”.<sup>96</sup> To end colonialism, one should neither borrow from the language of the colonizer, nor “speak truth to power,” for the regime of truth itself is inscribed into the colonial architecture of power.<sup>97</sup> One should instead “inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, the oppressed should refuse what they have been refused; they should ask: having been *refused reason*, why not also *refuse to reason with* the oppressor?

Much like how Harney and Moten and Halberstam conceptualize abolition and abolition’s refusal(s), I articulate the target of the *Gezi* protestors as not only their exclusion from public decisions *per se*, but also the conditions under which such exclusion becomes sustainable. For these conditions, which had to do with governmental logics that compartmentalize, classify, hierarchically order, and de/agentize groups, resistance needed new terms to speak with, new frames of thought, action, and identification. Having put the very validity of these logics into

question, *Gezi* helps imagine the construction of a different political community, which, by destabilizing the coordinates of sovereign/nonsovereign, sense/nonsense, civil/uncivil, political/nonpolitical, and knowing/unknowing, seeks to ‘abolish’ hierarchies among forms of doing, being, speaking, thinking, relating, and making that are embedded in structures of *police*.

### **From illegibility to inoperativity: *Gezi*’s formula**

If legibility, as James Scott and Halberstam concur, is often a “condition of manipulation,” then illegibility might be the way to escape that condition, unsettling the commonplace expectations and demands placed on political actors.<sup>99</sup> The notion of illegibility gained notable traction in critical theory with an emergent interest in what is now called “Bartleby politics.” Herman Melville’s short story, named after the main character, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Short Story of Wall Street,” has become a central text through which to meditate on resistance, with critical interpretations offered by Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek, and Bonnie Honig among others.<sup>100</sup>

The character Bartleby has come to signify a politics of refusal—though defined quite differently by each contemporary thinker listed here—by way of his signature phrase, “I would prefer not to,” which he repeatedly utters in response to the requests placed upon him in his workplace. Though ostensibly simple and polite, the phrase is in fact quite unsettling, denoting neither an affirmation nor a negation—the reason that it became a source of inspiration for theories of resistance/refusal. Instead of an absolute submission or rejection, Bartleby’s formulaic ambivalence manifests, using Deleuze’s words, a “certain mannerism” which disrupts the dichotomy between passivity and activity, performing an *indifference* to power with a potential to deactivate it.<sup>101</sup> Approaching Bartleby’s disruptive power as a linguistic/literary question, Deleuze develops a framework he calls “minor literature,” which “carves out a kind of foreign language

within language.”<sup>102</sup> The carved-out minor literature is an estrangement from the major literature, disidentifying with its dominant ethnic, national, and linguistic identities.

The certain mannerism Deleuze finds in nonhegemonic minor literatures is, in my view, precisely what *Gezi*’s language exemplified in, for example, the formula “down with some things,” which, at once, took down nothing and everything. Mannerism here disrupts the limits of the thinkable and practicable preset by, on one hand, the authority of Erdoğan and, on the other, a variety of marginalized but meta “-isms,” from statist secularism to socialism. Estranging public spectators from dominant, readily available, yet worn out, discursive repertoires, the *Gezi* protestors deterritorialized language, not vis-à-vis the Turkish language *per se*, but vis-à-vis the *lingua franca* of protest politics in Turkey. Their less legible, less monumental, and affirmatively unserious and immature speech acts manifest a radical commitment to inclusivity by refusing the standards of status and capacity commonly required for entering the public political sphere, what Leela Gandhi calls the “condition of adult rationality” rooted in Enlightenment thought.<sup>103</sup>

Such refusal to adopt illocutionary customs of the existing political order also materializes—akin to Melville’s *Bartleby*—an (in)activity that exploits the liminal zone between a potential to be (or do) and a potential *not* to be (or do). Working through this liminal zone, Agamben unpacks *Bartleby*’s formula as a disruption of the economy of will and necessity by what he calls an “absolute potentiality” that can exist without wanting, as potentiality differs from a mere unrealized actuality or lack of will.<sup>104</sup> After all, it is not that *Bartleby* “does not want to copy or [...] leave the office; he simply would prefer not to.”<sup>105</sup> Similarly, when the *Gezi* protestors replaced the preexisting discursive practices of various political movements across the ideological spectrum with enigmatic and seemingly apolitical ones, or when they responded to the government’s grave and injurious insults with playful and poetic performances, they too displayed

a capacity withheld (to be/act/speak like the state), an activity they preferred not to engage. In these ways, *Gezi* brought into being a new political language which shared characteristics with knowledges from below, non-hegemonic and low theories, minor literatures and disruptive potentialities, refusing the normative, instrumental, abstract, and/idealist imperatives sedimented in *police* politics.

Though not always explicit, my approach to power in protest politics is informed by Agamben's theory of inoperativity and destituent power grounded in Aristotle's conceptualization of power as *dunamis*, that is, capacity or potentiality.<sup>106</sup> What makes destituent power a compelling analytical category is its attentiveness to the two concentric meanings of power-as-potentiality: a potentiality to *do* and *not-do*, or, to put it differently, a simultaneous *can* and *can-not*. In Aristotle's articulation, a potentiality to do is co-constitutive with the potentiality not to do with respect to the same activity.<sup>107</sup> Drawing on this dual constitution, Agamben conceptualizes inoperativity in terms of activities that seek to deactivate "existing values and powers," neutralizing the operations and mechanisms which separate, categorize, rule out, and manage different forms of life.<sup>108</sup> The values and powers to which Agamben refers are predicated on normativity and instrumentality—two operative imperatives that govern human action by alienating it from its own experience.<sup>109</sup> Once conventional frames of normativity and instrumentality are suspended—rendered *inoperative*—then a new space opens up for free human action and new and experimental social relations.<sup>110</sup>

Inoperativity plays a constituent role in my analysis, as I investigate how the *Gezi* protestors negated separations and sortings that are often dichotomously constructed and instrumental in marginalization and delegitimation of protest activities. These dichotomies include "the people" and its other (Chapters 1 and 2), epistemologies of sense and non-sense (Chapter 3), subjects worthy and unworthy of politics (Chapters 3 and 4), the means and ends of action, and



civil and uncivil forms of resistance (Chapter 4). *Gezi*'s inoperative politics deactivates statist discourses and mechanisms of power, not to replace them with alternative forms of sovereign power, but to create sites for open-ended reconfigurations. Not ironically, most examples of such inoperative politics, as I underscored earlier, took apparently apolitical forms, negating politics-as-usual in favor of not-yet experienced ways of speaking, knowing, associating. The negation I explore at *Gezi* is thus generative, tracing out new understandings and practices of political action unbounded by, yet emergent from within, existing conditions of insurgency.

This negation is reflected in my own practice of theorization, insofar as I, too, refuse to construe the *Gezi* Protests as a from-below reclamation of title of "the people" in the face of its top-down majoritarian appropriation by the ruling authority. Instead of predicating the meaning and significance of protest on the democratic normativity and instrumentality of peoplehood, my account theorizes peoplehood in terms of a commitment to plural assemblages of collective action, desire, affect, and aesthetics. Agreeing with Barnor Hesse and Juliet Hooker, I *do* think that "we need to think against and in excess of the centrality of the state as the horizon of political intelligibility."<sup>11</sup> This is not an absolute refusal of formal or institutional politics, but an invitation to liberate political theories of protest and popular power from possessive grammars of sovereignty. It is thus an invitation to refuse to accept a kind of state-thought as the dominant regime of intelligibility or the yardstick of protest's meaning and significance.

In other words, by excavating the *Gezi* protestors' oppositional approach towards the state and statist languages, I construe dissensus as a particular form of inoperativity. Rather than competing for an entitlement to "the people," dissensus-as-inoperativity revokes the democratic normativity of peoplehood and its instrumental appropriation. The modality of "can-not," foregrounded in Aristotle's theorization of power as potential, *dunamis*, helps articulate protest

activities at *Gezi* as a dual capacity to be and not-be—to neutralize and negate so as to open space for experimentation and new becomings.

Inoperative politics thus works to abolish the conditions that “block desire, hope, and pleasure [which are] potential activators of social change and political transformation.”<sup>112</sup> Reactivating collective desire, joy, and hope over individual despair and disillusionment, embracing relationality and association over sovereignty and hegemony, inoperative politics creates conditions for social change and political transformation that can be collectively imagined, debated, practiced, contested, made, and remade.

## **Chapter outline**

Chapter one, “The *Gezi Spirit* and the Problem with Sovereign Constitutions” follows from this claim and examines how popular mobilizations are predominantly construed as sites of hegemonic contestation among competing claims to peoplehood and sovereignty in contemporary democratic theory. Through close engagements with Butler and Laclau and a discussion of the “public forums” at *Gezi*, I argue that the dominant approaches in democratic theory parallel some problematic tropes and political practices at the site of collective action. These tropes and practices privilege unity over difference, and fulfillment and closure over skepticism and critique. Against this backdrop, the second chapter, “Making a People: The Democracy Watches and *Gezi*-envy” reconstructs protest as an aesthetic and affective making of *a people*—a people which enjoys its togetherness through visualized, vocalized, performative, and self-affirming expressions of its presence. This figure of a people, enjoying a collective desire, exceeds “the people” understood as a legally authorizing entity, and exemplifies what I call the *inappropriate* character of protest.

The next two chapters give content to this inappropriability through analyses of specific protest practices. Thinking with and against Rancière, the third chapter, “Down with Grand

Narratives! Humor, Sense, Nonsense at *Gezi*,” examines how the *Gezi* protestors’ refusals to speak in the language of governmental power not only resisted the authoritarian policies of the government, but sought to alter the polarizing regimes of knowledge and rigidified subject positions shaping the social fabric of the Turkish republic. The fourth chapter, “Breaking Billboards: Protest and A Politics of Play,” draws on the writings of Agamben and Benjamin and analyzes a video clip, “Breaking Billboards,” to theorize the protestors’ refusal of the dichotomy between peaceful and violent resistance towards a new understanding and practice of political action as “play”—a reconfigurative interruption of the means-ends relation. The politics of play refers to what is captured neither by statist discourses in circulation nor by discourses that resist the state but remain captive to it by using its terms.

In the conclusion, I return to the aesthetics of *Gezi Spirit*, this time to draw a distinction between performative and non-performative forms of assembly and speech-action. Locating the distinction in broader debates on popular mobilization, unity, and difference, the concluding chapter rearticulates the dissertation’s proposal for shifting our political and theoretical investments away from tropes of popular sovereignty to a collective desire that is generated through creative praxes of refusal. It unpacks the importance and implications of this proposal through two examples of what might be called a pedagogy of protest. These examples, on one hand, affirm and expand the lessons derived from the previous chapters, and on the other hand, trace paths from the *Gezi* Protests to more recent political developments in Turkey. In doing so, they recollect the pedagogical returns of the other chapters towards a new account of popular mobilization that foregrounds protestors’ dialogic and experimental activities, and aesthetic and affective investments, all forming and participating in an economy of desire.



**Figure 1: “Joy is the laughter of resistance”**



**Figure 2: “Dude, don’t be scared; it’s us, the people”**

## Chapter 1: The *Gezi Spirit* and the problem with sovereign constitutions

### Introduction

Scholars of popular sovereignty and populism often claim that during extraordinary events, such as protests and uprisings, “the people acquire a face and a voice, and are given an imaginary social cohesion. Doubts about how a group of individuals could become a unitary actor with a single voice are suspended.”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, popular mobilizations transform the people from an anonymous electorate, that is, nameless and faceless numbers—or “mere statistics” in Claude Lefort’s words—to a collective assemblage with discernable figures, names, and practices.<sup>114</sup> During *Gezi*, circulating visuals, which featured protestors dancing in front of water cannons, playing music at occupied sites, reading by books next to a police shield, standing still in squares, or performing art at the barricades, individuated and singularized otherwise aggregate bodies, producing distinguishable figures and names.<sup>115</sup>

The rest of this depiction, however, requires a more critical look: Does protest generate cohesion and transform individuals to a unitary actor with a single voice? If, so how does that unitary actor come into being? Does it come into being without remainders? Is there any cost to such unification? *Gezi* presents an illuminating case to study these questions. In this chapter, I argue that, during popular mobilization, not only the questions about how a group of individuals can speak with a single voice, but often also the questions about the political costs paid in the formation of a single voice are suspended. To do that, I investigate the claims for cohesion and unity, advanced by participants and sympathetic observers of *Gezi*, as well as the costs paid for such cohesion and unity which have largely gone unnoticed.

Focusing on exoterically identifiable differences among protestors, a large body of scholars and public commentators has established the alliance at *Gezi* as a self-posed popular sovereign, thus, an instrument to challenge and delegitimize the electoral mandate of the *AKP* government.<sup>116</sup> Unlike the government's majoritarian identification with "the people," this popular alliance evoked a different regime of legitimacy—one that took its source from a qualitative plurality rather than a quantifiable count. On this account, the collective presence of protestors, with their different outlooks and demands, presented a non-electoral expression of popular will challenging the government's majoritarian claim to represent that will. Thus, the politics of *Gezi* has been predominantly construed, by both local and foreign scholars, as a hegemonic struggle over the name of "the people," performatively enacting the popular entitlement it claims.<sup>117</sup>

*Gezi*, to be sure, was not the only source of inspiration for radical democratic accounts. Against the backdrop of recent mass protests and occupy movements across the world, contemporary political theory has been increasingly taken up by notions of peoplehood, populism, and constituent power.<sup>118</sup> Most discernibly, the emblematic phrase, "We, the people," from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring, has attracted attention and elaboration, while gaining an additional depth when joined with contextual claims, including "They don't represent us," as in mass protests in Greece, Spain, Chile and Argentina.<sup>119</sup> These utterances by "the people" have prompted democratic theorists like Étienne Balibar to conceptualize protests as "'constituent' insofar as they are also 'insurgent.'"<sup>120</sup> Similarly, protesting masses have been perceived as a "*demos* in the square" folding the particular "'we' of the square" into the universal "we" of the people.<sup>121</sup>

The question I would like to propose is to what extent such conceptualizations of protest and peoplehood can and cannot account for the ambivalences and disavowals found at sites of

collective action. To answer this question, I engage closely with two contemporary theorists, whose theoretical and conceptual accounts have been particularly influential in shaping contemporary thinking in the wake of global mass protests: Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau. Both accounts are closely connected to the *Gezi* Protests: Butler, most directly, develops her account of the performative power of popular assembly in a timely engagement with the *Gezi* Protests; how Laclau structures his arguments about populist articulation of different social demands captures most closely *Gezi*'s prevalent public and scholarly representations. Both Butler's distinction between popular sovereignty and the authority of representative institutions and Laclau's concern for difference and unity align with the coordinates of popular constructions of *Gezi*.

Taking unfulfilled demands and ongoing struggles as their point of departure, Butler and Laclau offer different, but paradigmatic and compatible, accounts of a populist politics. Speaking and acting together, protestors, according to Butler, "assert themselves into the imagery and the discourse that gives us a sense of *who the people are*, or should be."<sup>122</sup> Undocumented, unemployed, and/or underserved, assembled bodies make "a public demand to *political powers*."<sup>123</sup> Less vivid and corporeal than Butler's account, Laclau similarly understands the origin of a new popular enactment as an "aggregation of heterogeneous forces and demands which cannot be organically integrated within the existing differential/institutional system."<sup>124</sup> Political relations, from both perspectives, are, then, always formed through a *vertical* tension between an institutional system of representation and a heterogeneous assembly, with the latter challenging and placing its force upon the former. This vertical tension, on one hand, appears as the efficient cause of resistance, and on the other, is perceived as generative of an alternate sovereign body. Whether it is the vocal and bodily enactment of "the people" (as for Butler), or the aggregation of outsiders into a hegemonic popular totality (as for Laclau), popular protest is taken to manifest a competitive



relationship between a political authority and from-below forces in terms of their claims to an order of legitimation and authorization.

What remains underrecognized in these antagonistic binaries, however, are the demands that people place upon one another (rather than upon the state alone), and the civic possibilities that emerge from within those heterogenous assemblies—possibilities that are not always, and/or nor yet, fulfilled. The phenomenon of “the people,” when theorized through the lens of sovereignty, come to be evaluated with respect to the ends to which it is directed, that is, the making of a hegemonic front. This ends-oriented approach diverts attention away from the relations that are still-in-the-making, promises and potentialities, as well as failures, shortcomings, omissions, and erasures that belong to collective action, and that together form the people in the realm of (inter-)mediality. While sovereign orientations in political theory rightly stress the contingent nature of popular enactments—noting that the moment a popular subject is enacted, it becomes an object of counterclaims by those who are excluded—they appear nonetheless insufficiently attentive to who is included under what conditions during popular enactments. Inclusion and exclusion may be the stable parameters of democratic contestations, but *the terms of inclusion*, in my view, often rather escape theoretical reflection.

Unlike contemporary theoretical reflections, which predominantly focus on what protestors make, enact, and establish, in this chapter, I explore what or who is silenced, erased, and forgotten in these makings. To unearth the negations embedded in *Gezi*’s sovereign imaginations, I employ the practice of problematization. As a method that fundamentally “embraces the discomfort, disorientation, and unsettlement,” problematization “aims to illuminate the logics that channel our thinking in order to unsettle them.”<sup>125</sup> By bringing to light the political costs of theories and politics of sovereignty, this chapter ultimately seeks to expose and destabilize the dominant lenses through

which popular mobilization is studied. It investigates the problem with sovereign constitutions at the register of both political theory and political practice.

In the register of political theory, I work at two concentric levels. At one level, I discuss how popular mobilization is conceptualized in radical democratic theory through close readings of Butler and Laclau. Although their accounts do not exhaust the field, they nonetheless paradigmatically illustrate the field's preoccupation with popular sovereignty when interpreting and analyzing dissident mobilizations. At another level, I attend to the ways in which *Gezi* itself has become a tool for contemporary theorizations of mobilization. The intricate relationship between *Gezi* and theories of popular enactment is evident in Butler's writing, where the *Gezi* protestors exemplify the performative making of "the people" in concerted action. It is also evident in vernacular writings on *Gezi* produced by Turkish scholars (some of whom identify as "activist-researcher[s]," drawing on their own experience at the protests) that are in conversation with the globally circulating theories of Butler, and more so, with Laclau.<sup>126</sup>

In the register of political practice, I bring to view how *Gezi* has been reflected in public debates and discourses during and in the wake of the protests, with participants, supporters, and sympathetic observants commentating on, and, in so doing, shaping the collective practices and self-understanding of the movement. Here, I focus particularly on the trope of the *Gezi Spirit* broadly defined as a "pluralistic *spirit* of the multitude containing within itself all those political differences."<sup>127</sup> The popular narratives about the *Gezi Spirit*, I show, parallel the scholarly accounts, insofar as both the concept and praxis of sovereign orientations tend towards a narrative of accomplishment and hegemony, privileging unity over difference, fulfillment and closure over skepticism and critique.

In the following sections, I first offer close readings of Butler, in relation to her larger body of work, and Laclau, in tandem with critical reflections on his theorization of populism. Next, I put their theoretical and conceptual accounts in conversation with political events and practices from *Gezi*. After discussing Butler and Laclau's accounts on their own terms, and around the problematics of a populist politics, I propose a non-sovereign politics and thinking, following Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, which, again, I explore in light of *Gezi*'s democratic lessons. In the concluding section, I discuss similar problematics found in contemporary American politics.

### **Butler's performative theory of assembly: an immanent critique**

Prominent examples of movement-informed political theory appear in Butler's recent book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (NTPTA)*, and in her co-edited volume, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, both published in the aftermath of the global wave of protests. The condensed illustration of Butler's thinking in these works is laid out most powerfully in the chapter, "We the People: Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly," in *NTPTA*, the original version of which she delivered in Fall 2013 after the summer of *Gezi* as a public lecture in Istanbul (as part of the Istanbul Biennial) under the title, "Freedom of Assembly, or Who are the People." In the speech, Butler discussed how freedom of expression and freedom of assembly prompt a reconceptualization of the people and the body. The written version, drawing mostly from the *Gezi* Protests and Arab Spring, further develops and substantiates the notion of "the people" as a performative enactment.

Thinking with contemporary mass mobilizations and informal assemblies, Butler argues that protestors, through concerted action, speech, movement, as well as stillness and silence, perform a civic "we," which posits and designates itself as "the people."<sup>128</sup> These linguistic and

corporeal performances are, for Butler, analogous to the performative work of the “Preamble” for the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*, which Arendt discusses in *On Revolution*.<sup>129</sup> Motivated by this analogy, Butler interprets the physical proximity and synchronized movement of protestors as a way of communicating their claim to peoplehood. Accordingly, when protestors make claims to public space, when they demand “greater justice, a release from precarity, a possibility of a livable life,”<sup>130</sup> their collective voice also “names and forms the people as a unity.”<sup>131</sup> In the coordinated bodily movements, discursive expressions, and stillness of protesting crowds, Butler finds an always-already present popular will:

“Although we often think that the declarative speech act by which ‘we the people’ *consolidates its popular sovereignty* is one that issues from such an assembly, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that the assembly is already speaking before it utters any words, that by coming together it is *already enactment of a popular will* [...]”<sup>132</sup>

Important here is how Butler aligns the voices and performances of protestors with a host of connected phenomena, including popular sovereignty and will, presupposing their transitivity. Popular appeals, from this perspective, become an expression of constituent power, the power to form a self-authorized and authorizing subject that can institute, alter, or displace authority.<sup>133</sup> Acting with autonomous, efficacious, and unilateral force, while also conscious and in control of their force, protestors, in Butler’s view, renew “popular sovereignty outside, and against, the terms of state sovereignty.”<sup>134</sup> Such a “power of populace,” different from the “power of those elected,” not only institutes and authorizes formal representative bodies, but also “runs counter to, and exceeds, or outruns” those bodies.<sup>135</sup> Thus, for Butler, popular mobilization brings into view an excess: protestors, representing the power of the people, possess the power to deauthorize the elected officials to speak for and act upon popular will. Or, to borrow from Pierre Rosanvallon, during resistance and rebellion, “the people comes into existence through collective action, somehow emerging as both the director and actor of its own destiny.”<sup>136</sup>

To be sure, Butler does not mean here that an assembly, in claiming to speak in the name of the people, can actually speak for the entire people. “The people,” she maintains, can never be adequately represented; popular enactments always remain incomplete and contested. Conceptually, “the people” is built on inclusions and exclusions, while, in itself, it is plural.<sup>137</sup> Deriving its meaning from “both its inadequacy and its self-division,” it does not imply uniformity or conformity.<sup>138</sup> Butler also underscores the *plurality of demands* (for better healthcare, secure jobs, housing, equality, dignity, non-violence) a popular assembly can make—an assembly that is composed of groups that are “differentially exposed to injury, violence and death.”<sup>139</sup> Vulnerability and interdependency are the conditions from which an assembly emerges.<sup>140</sup> Each of us, ontologically vulnerable to injury and dependent on “other bodies and networks of support” for our livelihood, are ethically obligated to be responsible for and responsive to one another.<sup>141</sup> This ethical obligation, also found in Butler’s earlier work *Frames of War: When Life is Grievable*, “seeks to minimize the unlivability of lives.”<sup>142</sup>

Still, Butler maintains that, however different the embodied demands and vulnerabilities are, an assembly, together as a collective body, lays a claim to popular will *in the moment it appears*.<sup>143</sup> The two frameworks *NTPTA* deploys—that of vulnerability/interdependency and popular sovereignty/will—together raise the following questions: If protest is essentially concerned with making lives livable, taking place against the backdrop of dependency on and obligation toward others, can it be subjected to the political theoretical itineraries of sovereignty? If the public appearance of a protesting group manifests sovereign schemes of representation, might it do so at the expense of, and/or in conflict with, other groups who do not (want to) appear?

As contested and contingent as it is, Butler’s theorization of a performatively sovereign assembly attributes to assembly’s participants an intention to lay a claim to “the people” as the

legitimate ground of authority. In doing so, it evaluates protest activities on the basis of, using Andreas Kalyvas' words, "the identity of the constituent subject, *the people*," who, from a "normative-democratic point of view," arbitrate between "legitimate and non-legitimate constitutions."<sup>144</sup> Protestors, within the democratic normativity of peoplehood, manifest a self-constitution that merits an entitlement to popular sovereignty.

Such normativity is not easily reconcilable with Butler's own philosophical commitments, considering how her earlier writings unfolded the perils of a sovereign view of language and subjectivity. Most notably, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler offers a persuasive critique of the phantasmatic production of the sovereign and culpable subject, whose speech act "has the power to do what it says."<sup>145</sup> Here Butler engages the figure of the performative sovereign in the context of 'hate speech controversies' against the backdrop of proposals for a juridical regulation of such speech. Problematizing the recourse these proposals make to the state's regulatory power, she enumerates a set of poignant inferences about the putative *efficacy* and *transitivity* of speech, in the sense that "it does what it says and it does what it says it will do to the one addressed by the speech."<sup>146</sup> In the following paragraphs, I take some time to outline Butler's problematization of sovereign subjectivity, since it will help me to reread her recent account of performative assembly in a new critical light.

First, for Butler, juridical regulation advocates affirm the state's authority to assign meaning to words instead of resignifying words insurrectionally and subversively. This allows the state—itsself a biased actor maintaining certain forms of injurious speech of its own—to demarcate the boundaries of the un/speakable, at the expense of what could be re/cited, revised, and/or de/re-contextualized.<sup>147</sup> Second, efforts at regulation, assuming a linear relation across intention, utterance, and action, thus disavowing the "undetermined character of these relations," model

speech acts on the “speech of a sovereign state.”<sup>148</sup> Just as a state possesses the juridical power to do what it says, the sovereign culpable subject assumes an equivalent efficacious agency invested with the “power of legal language.”<sup>149</sup> If the “gap between saying and doing” is completely erased in these assumptions, the recuperation of that gap would mean not a vindication of hate speech, but an invitation to tell the stories of “how and why speech does the harm it does”—a responsibility bestowed upon each of us.<sup>150</sup> Sovereign conceptions of subjectivity (here individual), however, obliterate such self-reflexive responsibility, presuming an immediate and automatic relationship between utterance (hate speech) and happening (of injury).

While *Excitable Speech* problematizes the idealization of speech acts as sovereign action, a much later work, *Precarious Life*, denounces other fantasies and seductions of sovereignty—for example, the safety that sovereignty provides—through an analysis of the United States’ war on terror. For Butler, the war on terror signifies, primarily, a disavowal of vulnerability, as it seeks to restore and maintain “mastery” by “stipulating a culpable (terrorist) other,” that is “sovereign and extra-legal.”<sup>151</sup> Thinking of “non-military political solutions” to the violence that the American state perpetrates and suffers, Butler proposes to cultivate an ethical responsibility to “attend to,” and “even abide by,” our shared (albeit differentially allocated) vulnerability, injury, and loss.<sup>152</sup>

Both *Excitable Speech* and *Precarious Life*, ultimately, criticize a set of misguided efforts, which seek to restore the “sovereign organization of power” at a political-theoretical conjuncture, where contemporary relations of power are ever more commonly considered to be diffused across multiple social sites, and thus, “no longer constrained by the parameters of sovereignty.”<sup>153</sup> Fantasies modeled on the *state* and its *judicial language*, for this reason, are symptomatic of a desire to return to a “more *reassuring* map of power, one in which the assumption of sovereignty remains secure.”<sup>154</sup>

In *NTPTA*, as we have seen, Butler maintains and extends some of the political theoretical inquiries central to these works, including human dependency, sociality, and vulnerability to anonymous others. What changes, however, is the form and nature of political subjectivity: from a collectivity that appeals to the “we” of a “*tenuous* ‘we’ of us all” to another one that now identifies itself with “we, the people” inaugurating its “sovereignty.”<sup>155</sup> The shift in Butler’s conceptualization of collective subjectivity is important, because it reveals the allure of peoplehood capitalizing on the notion’s implications for sovereign authority and juridical power.

Drawing insights from Butler’s earlier works, it is now possible to ask why, in *NTPTA*, the performative power of the people is “figured as the performative power of *state-sanctioned legal language*,” and thus modelled after the politico-juridical authority?<sup>156</sup> The critical questions Butler raises in *Excitable Speech* provide a useful resource for an immanent critique of her later account of political mobilization, as the latter stages the performative power of assembled bodies in “contest” with the state’s authority over an entitlement to represent popular will, hence, “as a battle between two sovereign powers”—a battleground *Excitable Speech* calls into question.<sup>157</sup>

To initiate this immanent interrogation, consider, for instance, *NTPTA*’s treatment of the internally divided” character of populace against the backdrop of the insurrectional and counter-insurrectional movements in Turkey and Egypt. Butler argues that the utterance of a ‘we’ (“the people”) by protestors “is always missing some group of people it claims to represent,” whether because those groups cannot appear—incarcerated, detained, spatially peripheralized—or because they do not want to appear “at all”:

In fact, as we know from the summer demonstrations in both Turkey and Egypt, in 2013 one group gathers in one place and claims to be the people, and another groups gathers across the way and makes the same claim, or the government gathers a group of people precisely in order to take the image that functions as the visual signifier of ‘the people.’<sup>158</sup>



The example Butler offers here visualizes the divisions and fractures inherent in any politically organized community, and perhaps more salient where political polarization runs particularly deep. Erdoğan, to be sure, makes no secret of his confidence in his party's quantifiable support base vis-à-vis its opponents, given his repeated public statements while the *Gezi* Protests were ongoing about the "fifty percent that [he] could barely keep at home [and prevent them from coming onto the streets for counter-protest]."<sup>159</sup>

Democratic politics, from a sovereignty-centric point of view, takes its contours from the contest between groups raising claims to popular sovereignty. It is no surprise that Erdoğan's populist-authoritarian regime posits one subset of population (verbalized as the "fifty percent") as the embodiment of popular sovereignty that institutes and grounds its 'democratic' rule.<sup>160</sup> The question is: why does Butler in *NPTA* mirror the regime's claim from below by theorizing the public presence and political agency of protestors in same statist terms as an intentional self-expression, a unified voice, claiming to be representative?

If, for instance, the vocalized and embodied "we" of the *Gezi* and Tahrir Protests, as Butler argues, marks the moment that "separates popular sovereignty from state sovereignty,"<sup>161</sup> then the performative assembly is politically significant only to the extent that it shores up, in Butler's words, the "power of legal language."<sup>162</sup> The separation *NTPTA* seeks between "parliamentary assemblies" and "extra-parliamentary power of assemblies" is itself invested in a vocation of representation and determination, insofar as it intends to "alter the public understanding of who the people are."<sup>163</sup> From this perspective, Erdoğan's answer to "who the people are" is, or could be, replaced by another answer from the streets, while the question itself—indicative of an orientation to nominate and identify—is left unproblematic.

Interestingly, what is at play here is a very similar normative inconsistency Butler diagnoses in punitive responses to injurious speech. About the debates on the regulation of hate speech, Butler points out that, from the punitive/juridical point of view, both the state and citizens are treated in equally sovereign terms—with an efficacious force—yet, only one of them is sought for its intervention. This preferential treatment prompts Butler to bring into view the inconsistency: “The problem, then, [for the defenders of hate speech regulation] is not that the force of the sovereign performative is wrong, but when used by citizens it is wrong, and when intervened upon by the state, it is, in these contexts, right.”<sup>164</sup> If I may borrow Butler’s logic, I would reformulate the sentence to propose that her account of *Gezi* (and *Tahrir*) might be suggesting that *the problem, then, is not that the force of the sovereign performative is wrong, but when used by the state it is wrong, and when acted upon by protesting citizens it is, in these contexts, right.*

### **Laclau and the limits of populist identifications**

Two decades after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (co-authored with Chantal Mouffe) replaced the Marxist theory of class with a new notion of “chain of equivalences”—an alliance of differentiated struggles challenging the existing power relations—as the engine of history, Laclau, turns more specifically to the question of popular identity which now more dominantly names that equivalential chain. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau argues that the name of the people is the common ground of an assemblage of heterogeneous elements, keeping those elements together against an antagonistic other.<sup>165</sup> Heterogeneity, on this account, refers to a plurality of social “demands” that are left unfulfilled within a given institutional setting.<sup>166</sup>

The generation of a popular assemblage out of diverse unfulfilled demands is contingent on two simultaneous and mutually reinforcing operations: a “differential” and an “equivalential”

articulation, which, together, exhaust *all* relationality in politics.<sup>167</sup> Accordingly, distinct demands and struggles converge in an equivalential chain on the ground of an “empty signifier” that compounds them together.<sup>168</sup> The empty signifier works as a common denominator, a superordinate identity, without any specific positive content other than the lack of fulfillment—the ground on which commonality is built.<sup>169</sup> The common disaffection provides the basis for particular demands to be linked to one another in a “transcendent, singular moment,” and their aggregation brings about “the people.”<sup>170</sup>

Importantly, particulars are not simply added up to a pregiven totality but transfigured into a new signifier—a “popular identity.”<sup>171</sup> The designation of an empty signifier is essentially an act of self-naming, functioning similarly to “performative enactment” in Butler’s account, insofar as “the identity and unity of the object results from the very operation of naming.”<sup>172</sup> Although, on Laclau’s account, a populist assemblage is built *not* on historically constituted identities (like race, ethnicity, gender, or class), but on particular social demands and visions that are aggregated into a chain of equivalence, it is nevertheless directed to *construct a new identity*.<sup>173</sup> Laclau attributes a certain neutrality to this operation of naming, noting that “nothing in the materiality of the particular parts [...] predetermines one or the other function as a whole.”<sup>174</sup>

As an empty signifier, a popular identity also signifies “something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links.”<sup>175</sup> It is the result of a hegemonic articulation, referring to an “operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification.”<sup>176</sup> The hegemonic identity-making manifests a “double movement” of representation, that is, an “autonomization” of the universal from the particulars it represents, while remaining not entirely autonomous so as to remain a nodal point of identification.<sup>177</sup> Accordingly, if a hegemonic totality becomes too autonomous from the diverse demands it keeps

together, then it loses its capacity to represent. On the flip side, if the represented parts (particular demands) turn out to be too autonomous from the totality, then the “representative totalization” becomes impossible.<sup>178</sup> In either scenario, the totality—“the people”—ceases to exist. To use Laclau’s technical terms, this is the moment when “the differential logic prevails, beyond a certain point, over the equivalential one.”<sup>179</sup> In less technical terms, this is the moment (“beyond a certain point”) that we find diversity and unity in tension, and that the former jeopardizes the latter’s political task, though it remains unclear where that moment of “beyond a certain point” begins.<sup>180</sup>

Difference, in Laclau’s theorization, is not only immanent to the equivalential chain; it is also exclusionary, separating an identity from an ‘other.’ While each element constituent of the chain is figured by a differential relation with respect to one another, they are also collectively different from an antagonistically construed outside.<sup>181</sup> This antagonistic relation to the outside is constitutive of the *unity* within the chain, as the “split of all identity between its differential nature” is accommodated by the unifying effect of exclusion.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, while each unit may retain their particular identity, the totality must transcend, and exceed, the sum total of differences, expanding the “equivalential logic at the expense of the differential one.”<sup>183</sup>

The antagonism between the inside and the outside of the equivalential chain structures the field of politics strictly in dichotomous terms, attributing both sides of the dichotomy “a sense of [...] cohesion.”<sup>184</sup> A political community is characterized by an antagonistic relationship between two irreducible camps: a popular front and its adversary, that is, “the ‘people,’ the ‘nation,’ the ‘silent majority’” (as for the “oppressed underdog”) *versus* the “the ‘regime,’ the ‘oligarchy,’ the ‘dominant groups’” (as for “the enemy”).<sup>185</sup> Through the “demonization” of the excluded enemy, the popular front “reaches a sense of its own cohesion.”<sup>186</sup> In short, the enactment of a chain of

equivalence is predicated upon solidification of political polarization—a friend-enemy, ‘us’ *versus* ‘them,’ distinction.

The problem with this formulation is that, in theorizing an antagonistic frontier, Laclau assumes that the popular side of the divide (‘us’) embodies only the “outsiders of the system, the underdogs,” whereas the ‘excluded identity’ (‘them’) appears always as something other than the marginalized.<sup>187</sup> The popular front is presupposed to be a coherent category, whose only conflict is with the oppressor, whereas, as Jean Cohen objects, “the ‘them’ is never only the establishment—it invariably includes the parts of the population not allied with the populist movement” who are often labelled as “undeservedly privileged population segments.”<sup>188</sup> The normativity of a “*friend/enemy conception of politics*” inadvertently promotes the idea of an “authentic majority,” the “real popular sovereign,” which is elevated not only above the corrupt elite, but also “the rest of the population.”<sup>189</sup>

Agreeing with Cohen, I would also add that, more importantly, “the people” and popular politics are much messier and gripped by differential power relations, hierarchies and exclusions that are irreducible to two diametrically opposed camps. Outsiders and underdogs do not make up self-contained, homogenous categories, and instead are shaped by internal struggles, conflicts, and contradictions. The implicit contours of the populist construction conceal the oft-realized possibilities of exclusion and silencing of particular demands, which are either not admitted to the status of the universal, or their inclusion is conditioned by curtailing their ‘excessive,’ ‘dangerous,’ ‘provocative’ aspects. In other words, Laclau’s theorization of populism implicates a somewhat naïve assumption that the outsiders and underdogs of the system are never the practitioners, but always and only the recipients and opponents, of injustice.

Formulating the equivalential chain as the outcome of an *entirely* open and contingent discursive process, Laclau also claims that none of the particular constituents of “the people” (in-the-making) has full control over its hegemonic embodiment and representation. Neither can any particularity determine what enters into the equivalential chain, nor is the process of naming subordinated to any “description or to a preceding designation.”<sup>190</sup> In this pure and perfect openness, Laclau’s field of politics takes on a somewhat idealistic meaning, *as if* it is free from historically constituted and contested power relations. The discursive field within which “the people” is constructed, on the contrary, is “far more ‘socially uneven’ and less open” than Laclau appears to recognize.<sup>191</sup> Different demands and struggles enter into not a totally open discursive field, but one that is entangled by technologies of invisibility. If not predetermined, constructions of “the people” are nonetheless shaped by mechanisms that facilitate and privilege the demands of certain groups, while blocking and disavowing certain others.

For instance, “in the context of patriarchal white supremacy,” Ewa Ziarek points out, “the political activism of women, especially women of color, is consistently blocked from the articulation as the exemplary expression of universal justice for all.”<sup>192</sup> Although one among other demands in a potential equivalence, “the demand of justice put forth by women of color” is never granted the order of an empty signifier “because of the invisibility of many forms of such domination.”<sup>193</sup> Similar to the feminist critics of Laclau’s theory, Benjamin McKean questions the universality of the populist enterprise, stressing that “some subjects are constituted with a racial identity that prevents their unmediated identification with the people as a whole.”<sup>194</sup> The racialized makeup of hegemonic identities, then, denies certain demands and grievances the exemplary status of universal justice.

The problem with Laclau's index of universality, totality, and populism is that it remains inattentive to the operations of marginalization that could be, and often are, at work within the very oppressed groups that he takes as the subject of his study. This is mainly because populism's objective is not to foreground and work through, but to transcend, if not suppress, difference. The project of populism overlooks how the universal status of "the people" is almost always achieved by an appeal to a majoritarian convention, which, borrowing Erin Pineda's words, "tends to require speakers whose standing as part of 'the people' is not radically in question."<sup>195</sup> The discursive field, imbricated in hierarchies of demands, desires, and aspirations, more often than not produce certain political subjectivities as extreme and particularistic and others as popular and universal.

The connections between how Laclau theorizes populism and how the term circulates in the real world are not too difficult to trace. Laclau's non-pejorative treatment of populism has opened new paths for left politics of alliance, inspiring numerous movements, party leaders, and political organizers across the world. If they do not quote directly from Laclau and Mouffe's writings in order to explain their movements' principles and strategies, as the leading figures from Spain's Podemos and Greece's Syriza have done, many political collectivities indirectly align their discursive repertoires with populist designations, as in 'the 99 per cent' of Occupy Wall Street.<sup>196</sup> Perhaps less popular among activists in Turkey, Laclau's theory still had important reverberations at the time of *Gezi*, given that the mobilization was predominantly evaluated in terms of its capacity to bring together different groups around the empty signifier of *Gezi* Park.

### **"The people" and its discontents**

The generative tension between the power of the people in streets and the authority to represent "the people" is a common point of departure for both Butler and Laclau. Through reflections on vocal and corporeal performances of the *Gezi* protestors, Butler presents "popular assembly" (of

*Gezi* and other movements) as a sovereign entity that “is already speaking before it utters any words, that by coming together [...] is already an enactment of a popular will.”<sup>197</sup> By invoking a “we,” protestors constitute themselves as “the people” in an “attempt to achieve and exercise hegemonic power.”<sup>198</sup> If Butler assumes collective action to take place always “*in the name of the people*,” associating protest with a “hegemonic struggle over who ‘we’ are,”<sup>199</sup> Laclau defines *all* politics by that struggle.<sup>200</sup> Essentially a populist enterprise, all political relations, for Laclau, are directed to the construction of a hegemonic identity that embodies the totality of “the people,” that is, a universal signification taken up by a particularity.<sup>201</sup> This hegemonic operation—the “elevation” of a certain particularity to the dignity of universality—forms the core of a politics of populism, or, in Benjamin Arditi’s words, “politics-as-populism.”<sup>202</sup> What is striking about these accounts are three main underlying premises, which I elaborate below.

First, by construing protestors as embodiments of popular sovereignty and theorizing popular mobilization as a site of hegemonic contestation among competing claims to peoplehood, these accounts collapse a set of related, but conceptually distinct, phenomena into one another. The presence, agency, power, and desires of an assembled collectivity become indistinguishable from popular sovereignty, hegemony, and will. Protesting groups, assembled in the streets and squares, are approached as a question of identification with the popular subject, even when such identification is taken to be contingent and contested. In other words, the political agency of a protesting collectivity is equated to a popular identity, displacing the distinction between doing and being—what protestors do and who they are.<sup>203</sup>

Second, the ostensible focus on unequivocal acts of self-authorization makes it difficult to adequately study the “coexistence of conflict and solidarity” among members of dissident alliances.<sup>204</sup> This is not to say that conflict is completely ruled out of these accounts, but it is to



say that conflict is *not* investigated in terms of *concrete* and *on-site* forms of repression, compromise, silencing, and disavowal it triggers. Although much attention is paid to contestations over ‘who is included or excluded,’ the question, ‘who is included under what circumstances, and with what kinds of compromise and/or sacrifice,’ is undertheorized.

Third, these theoretical constructions are also underwritten by an assumed duality between a popular subject (the legitimating source of public authority) and its ‘other’ (the state, government, establishment, elite), attributing a certain degree of consistency to both sides of the binary. Invested in an indivisible oneness, intentional self-expression, and identification, the ontology of sovereignty figures politics in dichotomous terms, presupposing an other—often an enemy—which justifies the force of the self-authorized entity. In its most decisionist, Schmittian, form, sovereignty, as Jacques Derrida argues, “never goes without an enemy.”<sup>205</sup> Even the circumstance that the sovereign is the people “does not damage the law, structure, or vocation of sovereignty,” which always presuppose “the determination of an enemy,” a diametrical opposite.<sup>206</sup>

To be sure, these accounts of protest provide invaluable insights into the ways in which discontented masses, at *Gezi* and elsewhere, expressed that they did not want to be governed by this or that government, and/or did not want to be governed in this or that way. The problem emerges when the potential democratic lessons of protests are replaced by normatively charged descriptions. Insofar protestors are construed as the voice of “the people,” the positive valorization arising from that identification overtakes other qualities and lessons to be learnt from protest activities. The following section turns to *Gezi* to illuminate these problems, exploiting the theoretical benefits of paying attention to the empirical particularities of the case, *Gezi*—a methodological commitment that the rest of this dissertation further materializes.

### **The *Gezi Spirit*: “what unites us rather than what separates”**

Arguably the most memorable image of the *Gezi* Protests is of two protestors escaping an anti-riot water cannon, soaked through, hand-in-hand. Taken by a journalist at Taksim Square, the photograph gained immense currency in public debates by its ‘frame breaking’ *mise-en-scène*.<sup>207</sup> The dramatic effect of the image derives from the ‘political identities’ of its protagonists: A young protestor, holding the banner of the Peace and Democracy Party (*BDP*)—representing the political claims of the Kurdish citizens of Turkey—and an older protestor, holding a Turkish national flag with a portrait of Kemal Atatürk on it (Figure 3). These two flags are proxies for diametrically opposed views on ideals of citizenship, constitution, and government in Turkey. By placing these two flags together in a frame, the photograph became a symbol of solidarity and coalition across distinct and often conflicting identities and demands. It incarnated what would soon be called the *Gezi Spirit*—“collectivity and solidarity on the one hand and the sisterhood of the people of all ethnicities and identities, on the other.”<sup>208</sup>

The iconic image, widely circulated and commented upon, underpinned the commonplace depictions of the protests: “Everyone was there with their own problems: the Alevites, the Kurds, the Armenians, the Kemalists, the Muslims [...]”<sup>209</sup> Political commentaries on the “unique and unexpected unification of different groups” configured the semantic field of *Gezi*, ascribing the resistance its meaning as the *common denominator* of all struggles. The quasi-mythical figure of the *Gezi Spirit*, as the token of a diverse alliance, dominated popular discourses, political meditations, and scholarly works. Stories and imageries about people uniting in struggle “despite differences and frictions” shaped public perception and understanding of the protests.<sup>210</sup>

During the protests, the symbolic structure of the *Spirit* helped hold the constituents of the movement together, while simultaneously producing a record of the event, how it was to be

remembered, memorialized, and told. The collective memory of *Gezi*, most specifically, consolidated around a universal romantic narrative suggesting that, by pushing their “disagreements and discrepancies into the background,” the movement could bring “remedy to the seemingly unending cycle of political polarization” towards a fully reconciled society.<sup>211</sup> This romantic narrative of remedial unity, celebrated by *Gezi* protestors, observers, and commentators, also came to be understood as a “remarkable embodiment of the theories” of collective will and “positive heterogeneity,” giving texture to the conceptual accounts of the burgeoning literature on (left) populism and peoplehood.<sup>212</sup>

While circulating popular narratives of the *Gezi Spirit* provide a comforting representation of the protests and remain as the main focus of scholarly reflections on *Gezi*, less has been said about what the romantic story-telling leaves unsaid, omits, erases, or occludes. The popular romantic arc, outlining the story of *Gezi* in terms of an emergence of a sovereign united people, obscures important insights that a rather more *ambiguous* account that attends to the omissions and reversals of the mobilizations would yield.<sup>213</sup> The following paragraphs tell a different story—one that complicates the praise of a unified voice by introducing silence and problematizes the tropes of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ by critically assessing rather the conditions under which such diversity and inclusion were made possible.

The iconic photograph I opened this section with was taken on June 13, 2013. From July through August, I attended daily neighborhood forums in different districts of Istanbul, including Beşiktaş, and my own district, Bakırköy (Figure 4). I went, most frequently, to the Abbasağa Park Forum at Beşiktaş, which was pulling larger and more diverse crowds than most other forums. As will be explained in the third chapter, these forums were self-organized informal gatherings which took place at public parks and squares during after-work hours. Forum participants would discuss

a broad range of socio-political issues, as well as how *Gezi* was and/or should be situated with respect to those issues. The discussions often proceeded in the form of discrete personal commentaries rather than connected conversations. They were facilitated by moderators, whose main task was to give every participant who raised their hand an opportunity to speak, and to ensure that speakers and the audience remain respectful. Hand signs were integral to the process; the audience was expected to express their agreement/excitement as well as disagreement/disapproval through these signs so as not to disturb the neighborhoods residents. There were also other hand signs for wrapping up speeches if speakers took too long or got unproductively sidetracked.

These forums did not take as their primary objective to arrive at collective decisions. Instead, they presented an opportunity for dissident citizens to *collectivize* their otherwise privately experienced agony of living under an increasingly authoritarianizing regime. For those whose first direct-action experience was *Gezi*, the protests were thrilling and transformative. Meanwhile, others, whose political subjectivities had already been shaped by former encounters with legal and coercive apparatuses of the state, were willing to use *Gezi* as a dialogic space within which to make their previous experience of injustice ‘legible’ to different and unconnected segments of society. In this way, *Gezi* embodied the potential of an experiential learning opportunity for many, who otherwise possessed limited insights into the forms of historical marginalization that certain minority populations encountered. Responding to this window of opportunity, some forum participants sought to draw parallels between the state’s coercive repression of *Gezi* and the political struggles of Kurdish citizens over the past three decades.

*Gezi* facilitated new social encounters and nascent collective sensibilities, to be sure. However, civic dialogue and understanding do not automatically follow from contingent

encounters, as they need to be invested with enduring attentiveness and care. Building communication around topics that are controversial to an ethnically Turkish majority was an arduous task at the forums, amidst official state doctrine ‘one nation, one flag, one state.’<sup>214</sup> When some forum speakers attempted to address state policies restricting the public use of non-Turkish native languages or the abundance of nationalist/patriotic symbols and rituals in everyday life, the atmosphere would turn tense and troubled. At these times, the facilitator of the forum would intervene, with tacit support from participants, and make a few unifying comments, emphasizing how they ‘were all united at [that] forum, resisting together and in solidarity.’ Commentators, too, would also often invoke the *Gezi Spirit* in an effort to tie the conversation back to ‘what unites everyone rather than what separates.’

The uneasiness of the crowd, upon hearing the demands for multilingual education or decentralized governance, reveals that certain “unfulfilled demands,” in this case particular to the Kurdish population (the largest minority group in the country), were not ascribed vital importance by the rest of the assembly, let alone a universal signification. Despite common characterizations of the forums as sites of unbounded and honest speech—akin to a totally open discursive field—in practice, most ‘controversial’ claims and ‘provocative’ requests were met with friendly reminders about ‘what the forums were about.’ Themes like ‘militarist state culture’ and ‘democratic regional autonomy’ were deemed dangerous for the united plurality and solidarity of *Gezi*, and commonly avoided by forum participants. If a speaker addressed Turkey’s differential citizenship regime, the moderator of the forum would call to reinstitute unity and social harmony: ‘Although there could be some unresolved issues in the past, what matters, now, is that we are all *here and together as one body*.’ And, ‘*this is what Gezi Spirit is*.’

Meral Uğur-Çınar and Çisem Gündüz-Arabacı's qualitative study on Izmir forums supports my observations, showing that forum groups were likely to avoid "political" issues in order to "preserve deliberative talk."<sup>215</sup> At forums, speakers would demand from one another that they "leave their political and/or religious identities outside" as a rule of conduct.<sup>216</sup> Given that the incorporation of different groups could be possible only "at the expense of leaving political affiliations outside the door,"<sup>217</sup> it was not possible for the much-acclaimed in-group diversity to fully translate into a dialogical encounter, mutual learning, or civic engagement. Retreating from controversy and confrontation for the immediate objective of keeping the alliance intact, *Gezi* forums reflected a perceived trade-off between conflict/disagreement and alliance/unity—a trade-off that is inherent in the logic of populism which, at its core, presents equality and difference oppositionally, indexing the former to a cohesive totality that suspends the latter.<sup>218</sup>

McKean elucidates this succinctly: "Within a populist logic, difference can never appear as a potential basis for unity, as when people's contributions to a common project are valued precisely because they are different."<sup>219</sup> Such logic is captured best by the invocations of the *Gezi Spirit*, the symbol of togetherness of different and distant segments of society, which, in effect, worked to control the salience of those segments' demands. Borrowing Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook's well-framed question, we should, therefore, ask: "What exclusions have the participants produced in the name of inclusion?"<sup>220</sup> Finding themselves torn between adhering to the possibilities of pluralism on one hand, and submitting to the anxiety of internal conflict and dissolution on the other, forum participants often chose to highlight commonalities rather than differences.

The policing of what could be said at the forums, through invocations of unity and the *Spirit* of the movement, is not inconsistent, in my view, with the celebration of the iconic photograph of two flags. To the contrary, both reveal an enchantment with the image of a sovereign

people speaking with a united voice to contest an authoritarian government-party, which, itself, claims to be the party of “the people.” It is not surprising in this context that most supporters of the *Gezi* Protests would find pride in being part of a collectivity that is active, embodied, and, most importantly, diverse. Beyond the widespread praise of diversity, a closer look at the forum experience, however, calls political theorists and actors to be more alert about the erasure of marginalized groups in the name of unity. Existing radical democratic accounts, advanced by scholars, activists, and scholar-activists alike, might be cognizant of the tensions at Gezi, yet less so about how those tensions were navigated.

The case of silencing and repression I presented above might be not just poorly executed cases of (Left) populism, but rather inherent to the logic of populism, because populist imagination, through hegemonic identifications, seeks a closure—as provisional and temporary as such closure would be. The provisional embodiment of an incommensurable universal signification (the elevation of a *particular* to the level of the *universal*) fulfills the yearning for *completeness* by naming an absent fullness (catachresis) and giving materiality to a reconciled society that is otherwise ontologically impossible.<sup>221</sup> In doing so, it provides a proximation to what we might call an ontological security. The security and comfort disavow disagreement, tension, and confrontation, creating a “reassuring sense that things, events, problems have reached solution.”<sup>222</sup> The power of collective action, on the contrary, arises neither from closure nor reassurance. It instead needs keen listeners who would stay together to work *with and through difference*, inhabiting the incomplete, the uncertain, the fragile, the arduous, the troublesome.

### **Thinking in non-sovereign terms: *our* graveyard and *our* park**

As much as sovereignty is central to the conceptual frameworks of modern philosophy, non-sovereign forms of politics have been productively explored by contemporary critical theorists.

Most prominently, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida have offered influential critiques of sovereign politics, disputing the reduction of politics to sovereignty. The following paragraphs turn to Arendt and more so to Derrida in search of non-sovereign forms of political thinking.

Defining power in politics in terms of a capacity to act together or act in concert, Arendt distinguished a *will-power*, which seeks to command from control, from a *potential-power*, which belongs to the agents of a public sphere and resides in “acting and associating with others.”<sup>223</sup> Throughout the history of modern political thought, political capacity, in Arendt’s view, has been perniciously misplaced in the former as “sovereign will” at the cost of the freedom and plurality that are essential to political life.<sup>224</sup> But, because sovereignty, popular or other, reflects an “ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership,” it is inherently “contradictory to the very condition of plurality.”<sup>225</sup> What keeps plural alliances alive, from an Arendtian perspective, is not their sovereign status, unity, or hegemonic power, but the promise to act together in the public realm of appearance, where association and attentiveness arise.

Like Arendt, Derrida, too, decouples freedom from sovereignty, self-possession, and positionality, scrutinizing the construction of a willing and knowing agent which holds the capacity to rule over itself and “carry out its will into the world.”<sup>226</sup> Though, unlike Arendt, who turns to the Greek *polis* to mobilize a non-sovereign capacity that sustains the public realm, Derrida recovers non-sovereignty from within the very “partings, partitions, divisions, conditions” of sovereign potency, which, fictitiously, is “always supposed to be indivisible and unconditional.”<sup>227</sup>

As Derrida deconstructs sovereign constitutions, particularly in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, through the works of modern literature and philosophy, he rethinks sovereignty in its multivalent forms and conditions. The “partings, partitions, divisions, conditions” belong to, borrowing Arendt’s words here, a site of appearance that cannot be assimilated in an identity, an



intentional self-expression, or a sovereign declaration.<sup>228</sup> Politics, for Derrida, is comprised less of a determination or decision than of an unsettled negotiation between an incalculable, incommensurable *singularity* and a countable, calculated *universality*—between “heteronomy and autonomy, indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty.”<sup>229</sup>

Deconstructing the reassuring structure of sovereignty, Derrida suggests: “In a certain sense, there is no contrary of sovereignty, even if there are things other than sovereignty.”<sup>230</sup> Accordingly, the choice is not between two pure concepts of sovereignism and anti-sovereignism, or “sovereignty and nonsovereignty,” not least because pure anti- or non-sovereignty would itself be another (dishonest fictional) sovereign disposition *tout court*.<sup>231</sup> The choice rather stands between the forms of breached, divided, conditioned sovereignties.

Derrida’s excavation of a non-sovereign politics from within the limits of sovereign reason reflects the “‘not’ of possibility,” to which I will return again in Chapter 3. Insofar as “not” does not signify, as we would quickly assume, the diametrically opposite attribute, and rather includes everything that is “different from” or “other than” the attribute in question, nonsovereignty, too, signifies all *potential* forms of politics that are “not pre-given as the opposite” of sovereign, as much as they are not reducible to the attributions of sovereignty.<sup>232</sup> As such, non-sovereignty embodies everything from “not-(yet)-being” to “not-(anymore)-being,”<sup>233</sup> *liminal* to what Derrida refers as “the energy of an intentional and deciding will.”<sup>234</sup> I will unfold this “not” of possibility and liminality through the democratic ideal Derrida advocates: unlimited critique.

Democracy, Derrida notes, “is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy.”<sup>235</sup> This “interminable self-criticizability,” the single inviolable principle of democracy, functions also as a double bind or aporia, often triggering an “autoimmune process.”<sup>236</sup>

Since democracy stipulates unconditional freedom and equality by its name, it requires the inclusion of all, that is, even those who would seek to suspend democracy. The aporia of the unlimited critique, Derrida argues, marks democracy's self-suicide, as much as its possibility for an "infinite respect of singularity and infinite alterity of the other."<sup>237</sup> Popular elections, for instance, are one site, where this aporia/auto-immunity manifests itself, as they can possibly (and sometimes *do*) bring into power leaders and parties that are ready to vote out democracy.<sup>238</sup>

Derrida's electoral aporia is quite insightful and eerily applicable to the *AKP* regime. But we should also notice that electoral politics, with its non-democratic champions, is not the only site in which democracy destroys itself. While the internal critics of democracy—at times representing the popular will—could become an auto-immune destructive force, the opposite would also be true: the absence and disavowal of self-criticism (in an effort to ensure the survival of a system, constitution, collectivity) could, as well, be the demise of democracy. This precise fear of criticizability explains the self-protective reactions we saw at *Gezi*, at a time that the movement was, using Derrida's words, "still heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed, full of contradictions."<sup>239</sup> In an attempt to retain the plural composition of the movement in unity, and with heightened anxieties about fracture and dissolution, most *Gezi* supporters ended up avoiding internal critique that would require an engagement with the nonconforming, disruptive, unanticipated, and discomfiting proposal coming from the margins.

If there is an autoimmune complex that *Gezi*, as a democratic experiment, carried with it, its source was, rather than an infinite critique, the denial of such critique, risking plurality in the name of a united sovereign power. While sovereignty reassures, non-sovereignty unsettles. Still heterogeneous and still somewhat unformed, "the people," mobilized in action, carry a potential to bear witness to their own contradictions, tensions, and troubles. It is the problem-space of non-

sovereignty, rather than the ontological safety of sovereignty, that keeps politics open to interrupting critiques, and attunes us to the ways in which speech and action reveal, in Arendt's words, the "unique distinctness" of political actors.<sup>240</sup>

If sovereign unity, as Derrida suggests, is a dishonest fiction that politics has been captivated by, then "plurivocity" might be the "non-fictional necessity."<sup>241</sup> Or, if we understand non-sovereignty along the lines of Oliver Marchart's formula of "*un-naming*" (un-naming, for example, the name of the people), then, what we encounter in the "pluri-perspectivity (in an Arendtian sense) of the sphere of politics" would "not [be] a single name of 'the people' but a plurality of names."<sup>242</sup> The following paragraphs explore the limits of such pluralization within sovereign naming practices, and open up a space for rethinking what is always split and sometimes forgotten.

*Nor Zartonk*, an activist youth group formed by Istanbul Armenians, was among the first groups with a tent at *Gezi* Park during the occupation. When the park started to gain its festive character and turned into a "commune," with different collectives performing, exhibiting, and exchanging forms of protest and living, *Nor Zartonk* members decided to install a replica of a gravestone next to their tent.<sup>243</sup> On the gravestone, the activists wrote in Turkish and English: "You captured our graveyard, but you can't capture our park," referring to the Armenian cemetery that used to exist in the space of *Gezi* Park. The cemetery had been confiscated and destroyed in the 1930s as part of the Republic's foundational violence against and dispossession of ethnic and religious minorities that marked the early years of nation-state making. Aligning this *particular*-historical object of loss (the cemetery) with the *universal*-contemporary object in demand (the park), the slogan on the gravestone was designed to mobilize an illocutionary identification, which would construct a common ground of injustice. The slogan immediately attracted broad attention

and was celebrated for its exemplary exhibition of the *Gezi Spirit*. With such publicity, in Ayşe Parla and Ceren Özgül's words, *Nor Zartonk* "came to occupy the 'Armenian slot'" within the heterogenous coalition.<sup>244</sup>

What further meanings, beyond the demonstration of the Armenian minority's support for the protest, may be embodied in *Nor Zartonk*'s gravestone-banner? Parla and Özgül suggest that, when read carefully, the slogan appears to unify "two *ours*, the *our* of the minority and the *our* of the majority," merging the spatial memories of these two sites, which belong to two different populations: the public park of an allegedly unified resisting body (the dissident citizenry), and the public cemetery of a subsector of that citizenry whose historical presence and legacy have been denied by the canonical narratives of the Turkish state (the Armenian citizens).<sup>245</sup>

Although the juxtaposition of these two spatial belongings, surely, brought some visibility to the erased memory of Armenian property, the slogan was not curated to unravel "the differential property and citizenship regime of the republic," or to make claims for restoration and reparation.<sup>246</sup> More importantly, within the multicultural diversity of *Gezi*, the inclusion of an Armenian claim to property (the cemetery) could be achieved *only through* its immediate identification with the property of the sovereign nation (the park). The immediate identification, as Parla and Özgül note, was "perhaps the only way possible that *Nor Zartonk* could carve out a sustainable space for itself in the *Gezi* uprising."<sup>247</sup>

It is also important to note that the inegalitarian arrangement here between the particular and the universal is disavowed by the very hegemonic construction of "the people" of *Gezi*. This is because lenses of popular sovereignty remain inexpedient to critically examine the limits of a unified "we" which claims an "our" in the face of differential regimes of inclusion into the collectivity of the "we." The question, therefore, should be not so much about who/what is included

in a “we,” in “the people,” but more about *how*, and *on what terms*, they are included. To be sure, the Armenian youth was included, and indeed visible, in the heterogenous alliance of *Gezi*. However, it is less certain whether the Armenian population’s (alongside other minority groups’) historical demands on a range of issues from civic and civil rights, religious and linguistic freedoms, to reparations, property, and education were given the opportunity of public deliberation on an equal ground.

In the case of *Nor Zartonk* and *Gezi*, the incorporation of the Armenian constituent into the unifying spirit of the movement was predicated on the Armenians’ renunciation of their claim for reparatory justice, which was considered to be too radical and/or (ethnically) particularistic. This is to say that, *at the very moment* “the cemetery” entered into the public realm of appearance through *Nor Zartonk*’s slogan, it was withdrawn and replaced by “the park.” Indeed, what enabled the cemetery’s utterance in the first place was its expected subordination to the park. The sovereign people of *Gezi*, in that sense, was largely prefigured by a denial and erasure of histories and peoples whose demands do not receive priority. The slight utterance of a forgotten past was conditioned on simultaneously surpassing it and ‘moving forward.’ The only way that minority claims could be voiced and heard (they could “carve out” a space for themselves) was to divorce those claims from their anti-nationalist radicality and submerge them in the *common identity* of *Gezi*.

To this day, the *Gezi* protestors’ reclamation of the park, which had its stairs constructed by the repurposed gravestones from the Armenian cemetery, is read as a “popular” intervention. In contrast, a potential demand for reparative justice by Armenian protestors would be heard only in particularistic, if not divisive, voice, as the ones who can speak for “the people” are tacitly preestablished within the nation-state’s differential membership regime. This is where the use of non-sovereign politics becomes apparent. A non-sovereign politics would deconstruct the

constituent moment of the emergent people of *Gezi* in order to reveal the disappearance and withdrawal upon which such moment is premised. The task of critical theory, therefore, should be to problematize and seek to recover the absence that follows disappearance.

If one side of the story of *Gezi*, or any other protest movement, is about what comes into being and what is constituted through collective action, the other side concerns what disappears, what has to be negated for that constitution to happen. Contemporary accounts, theorizing protest through the lens of popular sovereignty, focus their attention on the making, the positivity, and the end of action, at the expense of the forms of disappearance, silencing, and disavowal that undergird such making. These are the forms of forgetfulness that are inscribed in the record of the event, which are disguised by mythologized constructions of the *Gezi Spirit*.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, against the backdrop of protest movements like *Gezi*, political theorists, as well as public commentators, tend to index the political quality, or the ‘event’uality of the protests, to the enactment of a sovereign popular body that can know and speak its will by constructing a popular assembly, an authorizing and legitimating entity. This, we have also seen, does not necessarily mean that the question ‘who is the people’ has a definitive answer in political theory. Both Butler’s and Laclau’s accounts, like most others in radical democratic theory, are careful to conceptualize a constituent people that is always incomplete, “appropriated, contested, and renewed.”<sup>248</sup>

On these accounts, the declaration, “we, the people,” as an aspirational exercise, every time falls short of its claim when it speaks in the name of a totality, given the continuity of the struggles over the boundaries of “the people.” The hegemonic declaration’s “impossibility,” in Laclau’s terms, or “failure,” in Butler’s, to represent all the people “does not need to be lamented,” as both

theorists suggest, because such challenges to the name of the people is part and parcel of democratic politics.<sup>249</sup> A foreseeable failure to be consubstantial with “the people” does not obstruct a group, in a given instance, from making that claim, neither does it nullify the claim if another group, in another instance, makes the same claim.

Nonetheless, I still contend that even though this account of contest and renewal may capture the democratic paradox, it does not quite locate an actual “failure” that could occur in universal declarations. The *failure proper*, in my view, occurs *not* when a declaration is challenged, but when a declaration fails its own intentions or promises. If democratic politics only partially concerns naming “the people” (the part that a putative sovereign popular body is enacted), the rest is about what happens all along as such naming takes up a vocal, visual, embodied materiality. When an assembly of people uses the plural pronoun “we” on behalf of, and in the name of “the people,” it declares its commitment to the plurality of voices that it aspires to embody. In turn, the assembly fails not when its sovereign claims are challenged by another popular assembly or state authority, but when it breaks its promise on that aspiration, and represses some of its constituent elements so as to secure a unified voice.

Wanted but not welcome, plurality remains an unsettled question for *Gezi* and other anti-governmental alliances in Turkey. *Gezi*, however, is not unique in terms of the suppression of particular social justice struggles associated by the majority with either factionalism or digression and distraction. Scholars and activists have raised similar questions about radical democratic populism in American politics. For instance, drawing on her experience at the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Spokes Council meetings, Hannah Appel describes the ways in which “an ostensibly inclusive and horizontal process [could] marginalize people” and create “productive tensions.”<sup>250</sup> Similar to the ‘dangerous’ subjects of *Gezi* forums, conversations around racial justice, Appel

reports, were usually met with a general discomfort at the OWS meetings, and cut short by facilitators upon the audiences' hand signal "off-process," meaning that the speaker brings up an irrelevant issue that is not "on process."<sup>251</sup> In fact, race was not the only category marginalized by the abstract agency of "process."<sup>252</sup> People with "different educational backgrounds, class backgrounds, home statuses (often the chronically homeless) and certainly different psychological habitations of the world" were considered disruptive, creating the impression that "*Occupy movement [was] not for them or their concerns.*"<sup>253</sup>

Similarly, Laura Grattan points out the "limits of populist identification to address demands for racial justice" through a thoughtful analysis of Bernie Sanders's run through the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries, and, more broadly, the contemporary broad-based populist movements in the United States.<sup>254</sup> Connecting discursive approaches to populism with populism's "embodiment, performance, and praxis," Grattan's analysis problematizes the potential "erasure of marginalized groups"—a probability that is both "inherent in populism's discursive logic" and inscribed in social contexts "divided by class, race, gender, and sexuality."<sup>255</sup> As populist alliances are always formed within larger fields of social heterogeneity, they stand in opposition to not only antagonistic forces (like the government, elite, or establishment) but also forms of "heterogenous excess" that do not have access to "a general space of representation" and need to be contained for the viability of the popular front.<sup>256</sup>

A telling example of such an attempt at containment, Grattan demonstrates, was the Sanders campaign's initial "color-blind rhetoric" which perceived specific issues that concern Black Americans (including policing, mass incarceration, felony disenfranchisement, discrimination housing and employment, among others) as "excess" and thus ostensibly rendered racial problems "illegible" to popular and populist politics.<sup>257</sup> This perception—in Grattan's



words, a “disposition toward erasure”<sup>258</sup>—was at play, for instance, at a Sanders rally in Seattle, where the rally organizers tried to silence two Black Lives Matter activists who had taken over the stage to call out Seattle, “a city that prides itself on its progressivism,” for its role in fostering gentrification, police violence, and youth incarceration. Even more telling was one rally organizer’s repeated warning to the activists—“*We are trying to be reasonable*”—to which they replied: “We honor Black lives by doing the unthinkable, the unapologetic, and the unrespectable.”<sup>259</sup>

We will see why, and with what political stakes, some political actors choose to do the unthinkable, the unapologetic, and the unrespectable in Chapters 3 and 4. For now, both Appel and Grattan’s accounts are noteworthy, because, read together with the forum experience from *Gezi* discussed in this chapter, they urge political theorists and actors to be more alert about the silencing and repression of marginalized voices in the name of hegemonic unification. What requires further attention in most radical democratic accounts, by scholars and activists alike, is not the mere construction of popular alliances and assemblies, but *how they are constructed*, that is, how they negotiate the structural differences and hierarchies with which they are entangled. Without critical self-reflection, participants of populist projects, captive to a worry that they would fail unless people stand together, reinforce the erasure of what Grattan calls “populism’s own margins.”<sup>260</sup> They do so by, on the one hand, expressively applauding the plurality of groups participating in the popular camp, and on the other hand, dictating the terms of their participation. Such acts of dictation, at times subtle, at times overt, undermine the potentials and promises of popular protest, trading a differentiated and excessive togetherness for a harmonious and reconciled oneness.

This chapter shed light on the moments where the political implications and potentials of “plurality” in protest were placed in a false alternative between unbounded critical speech and

hegemonic unity. Problematizing the provincial closure and reassurance attached to sovereign conceptions of peoplehood, I discussed the political costs of hegemonic imaginations found in the thinking of scholars, protestors, and observers alike. The next chapter follows from this discussion and asks: What happens when from-below mobilizational forces publicly pledge allegiance to the government? What if the “constituent moment” does not mark the emergence of a people through dissident action, as democratic theorists find in *Gezi*, but a “second founding” of the Republic under the current regime?<sup>261</sup>

The volatile political scene in Turkey allows me to investigate these questions in non-hypothetical settings. In the next chapter, I offer an analysis of Turkey’s 2016 “Democracy Watches,” a set of theatrical mass gatherings, elaborately stylized and carried out by Erdoğan’s *AKP* in major cities across Turkey following a failed coup attempt. These gatherings, in ways that were reminiscent of *Gezi*, were designed to celebrate a resistance waged by the regime supporters at the night of the failed coup, July 15, 2016. Since that date, the pro-regime popular mobilization is celebrated by the government and its support base as a “constituent moment” that manifested popular sovereignty. Needless to say, the Watches, so far, have not been an inspiring source for theorists of populism and popular sovereignty. My turn to the Democracy Watches, as I elaborate next, is not to forge a distinction between good and bad forms of populism or popular sovereignty, but to continue to problematize the dominant vocabularies we invoke in our attempts to understand and theorize popular protest.



**Figure 3: The “frame breaking” *mise-en-scène***



**Figure 4: A speaker at Abbasağa Park Forum, Beşiktaş / Istanbul**

## Chapter 2: Making a people: The Democracy Watches and *Gezi*-envy

### Introduction

On the night of July 15, 2016, during a fairly uneventful summer, there was an attempted coup in Turkey. By sunrise the next day, it was clear that the military faction responsible for the coup had failed in its proclaimed goal of taking control of the government. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the military takeover had been thwarted by the heroic resistance of the thousands of civilians who had poured into the streets in instantaneous response to his televised FaceTime call-to-action at midnight on July 15th. After the coup failed, Erdoğan continued to call people into the streets, to, as he repeatedly put it, “watch for democracy.” So began the month-long “Democracy Watches,” a set of mass gatherings elaborately curated by local organizations of Erdoğan’s *AKP* and carried out in major cities across Turkey.

In late July 2016, I attended my first Democracy Watch at Ankara’s *Kızılay* Square, renamed, post-coup, “July 15 *Kızılay* National Will Square.” There I was met with dizzying crowds, music, food, and drinks. I missed the sandwich service but had tea—compliments of the *AKP*-governed Ankara municipality—which critics would soon wittily rename “democracy-tea.” It was served near democracy-tents hosting democracy-concerts and democracy-forums, all set up by the *AKP*. The atmosphere at these government-sponsored gatherings was festive in ways that oddly recalled the anti-government *Gezi* Protests of 2013, with similar forms of crowd-drawing space-making activities, including tents with banners, communal dining, music performances, photographs, and slogans on large movie-size screens. Though largely without the collective organization and from-below creativity of *Gezi*, the Watches opened a space of public appearance akin to *Gezi* where attendees took pleasure in belonging to a community. I call these resonances odd because the *Gezi* protestors had been brutally repressed by the *AKP* and dismissed by then

Prime Minister Erdoğan as “a few looters,” “*çapulcu*,” whose actions he described as ill-intentioned and unworthy of attention.<sup>262</sup>

I consider Erdoğan’s comments as a governmental strategy of containment in Chapter 4. For now, it is important to note that, despite their devaluation and disparagement, the *Gezi* Protests were not set aside and left to be forgotten. Recalling *Gezi* himself, in his first public appearance after the 2016 attempted coup, Erdoğan referred to the *Topçu* Barracks, the reconstruction project that sparked the *Gezi* Protests in the long summer of 2013, proclaiming: “We will also build the replica of the historical barracks in *Taksim*, whether they want it or not.”<sup>263</sup> One year after the coup attempt, which had, by then, been rebranded as a constituent moment through an act of parliament declaring July 15 a national holiday—the Day of Democracy and Unity—Erdoğan addressed the question of who the ‘youth of the July 15’ was by drawing a contrast to the ‘youth of *Gezi*’:

One of the biggest heroes of the July 15 was *our youth*. [...] Immediately taking action, they stood up against tanks and retrieved the areas invaded by the coup plotters. The young generation, ‘from whom,’ some said, ‘would come no good any longer,’ embarrassed that night who thought this way [sic]. *Those coming there that night were not the youth of Gezi Park*. Those who came there that night were the ones who loved the country. They were the ones who set out for the country and the adhan.<sup>264</sup>

This is not the only speech in which Erdoğan described resistance against the coup as more righteous, more courageous, and more dignified than *Gezi*. Nor is Erdoğan alone in his regular disparagement of the *Gezi* protestors. Other *AKP* members, including ministers and members of Parliament, joined Erdoğan to claim that the “*Gezi* Protests were rather invented to hamper Turkey’s growth and development.”<sup>265</sup> Events even more remote from *Gezi* in time and place, such as the 2018 Yellow Vest uprising in France, have served as opportunities for party members to interpolate the *Gezi* protestors in order to vilify them.<sup>266</sup> Given the government’s repression of the protests when they were initially waged—a repression that is ongoing and has intensified—why do the party members and leadership continue to bring up the *Gezi* protestors rather than

consigning them to the dust heap of history? And if, as Erdoğan repeatedly claims, *Gezi* serves as only a negative comparison for July 15, why did the *AKP*, in its production of the Democracy Watches as a rival popular mobilization, seek to reproduce *Gezi* through imitation?

The government party's inverse fidelity to *Gezi* is strange not least because it is at odds with the *AKP* regime's own predicates, which claim to ground legitimacy only and conclusively in electoral outcomes.<sup>267</sup> Since the *AKP*'s rise to power in 2002, elections in Turkey have displayed an ongoing and stable split in the population: popular support for the party sits at approximately fifty percent, though in the most recent municipal elections this support shifted to the opposition in major cities. Confirmed by national, municipal, and presidential elections, as well as constitutional referenda, the more or less steady backing of the *AKP* constitutes the mainstay of Erdoğan's majoritarian populist claim to represent "the people" and gives the *AKP* the capacity and means to act in the name of popular sovereignty. As Erdoğan once reminded the Cuban leader, Raul Castro: "People make revolution at the ballot boxes."<sup>268</sup> The fact of its electorally-mandated popular power as well as the relative stability of that power make the government's recurring reprisals of *Gezi* especially worthy of systematic attention.

This chapter makes the case that the Turkish government's attachment to *Gezi* reflects its dual efforts to both suppress and surpass *Gezi*. I address these efforts through the analytical lenses of "envy" and "mimesis." Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein and Joan Copjec, I argue that, while repeatedly maligning *Gezi*, the regime seeks to have its own *Gezi* because it *envies* *Gezi*'s *jouissance* or joy, and that it envies *Gezi*'s joy for the collective desire it generated through corporeal experiences and intermediating cooperative practices. In my view, the regime envies the collective desire of the *Gezi* protestors for its constitution of *a people* that exceeds the 'electoral people' claimed by *AKP* officials as their base of support. Seeking to create, harness, and

appropriate a counter-equivalent desire for its base, Turkey's political authority strives to make its loyalists see themselves as an insurgent and incipient *people*, similar, but superior to, 'the people of *Gezi*.' Drawing on work by René Girard, I analyze the regime's rivalrous imitations of *Gezi*'s discursive narratives, visual constructions, and spatial practices as means of achieving a similar collective desire and peoplehood for its own constituency's enjoyment. In Girard's terms, this operation is a manifestation of the *AKP*'s "mimetic desire" directed at its opponents in the streets.

The *AKP*'s *Gezi*-envy, on my account, attests to a surplus quality that 'a politics out of doors' embodies.<sup>269</sup> Extraparliamentary forms of mass appearance, protest, and gathering manifest a materialized desire and self-apprehension that are not fully captured by discourses of popular sovereignty and authorization.<sup>270</sup> Invested in majoritarian identification with "the people," while at the same time cognizant of the need for public practices that would give materiality to that identification, the *AKP* regime exhibits a familiar dilemma:<sup>271</sup> How can a ruling populist party tap into the synergetic, affective, and vitalizing energies of people, if those energies are most powerful when people are assembled in protest?

I read the Democracy Watches as the *AKP*'s answer to this dilemma. Despite their orchestration by the ruling party, Turkey's Democracy Watches were anchored in a ground-up resistance, dated to the night of the attempted coup. Their origination in popular energy, wrapped in a "myth of the great democratic victory of the people," produced a unique political authority that differentiates the Watches from ordinary party rallies organized by populist leaders around the world.<sup>272</sup> I bring this unique production to light through a political account of "envy," articulating a triangular desire across the *AKP* regime (an order of relations among state, society, and party apparatus), mobilized dissent, and dissent's pro-regime double, the Democracy Watches.

I treat the *AKP* regime's envious desire for *Gezi's jouissance* as residing not in any particular individual subject or figure but instead as circulating across individual and collective actors aligned with the *AKP*. In this sense, my treatment of envy is similar to the "economic model" Sara Ahmed employs to theorize affectivity and the mobilization of emotions as movements "between bodies and signs."<sup>273</sup> In this economy, any single individual is only "one nodal point" rather than [the] origin or destination" of an affect of emotion.<sup>274</sup> In the case of post-coup Turkey, the continual defamation of *Gezi* and competitive comparisons between *Gezi* and the Democracy Watches are most prominently performed by Erdoğan, to be sure, but they are also, as noted, performed by a plurality of *AKP* members. The large-scale orchestration of the Democracy Watches would not have been possible, in any case, without the zealous efforts of local *AKP* personnel and state officials across the country.<sup>275</sup> Neither would they have been possible had not the masses, the majority of whom were *AKP* voters, participated in the party's efforts. As we will see, with their signs and slogans, the Watch participants presented themselves as inverted mirror-images of the *Gezi* protestors, joining the *AKP* leadership in comparing *Gezi* and the mobilization against the coup.<sup>276</sup> Not at all an effort to "pin down" or "locate" envy in a particular body or subjectivity, my account presents instead a theoretical analysis of the regime's envy and what that envy does—how it mediates relationships between individuals and collectivities and what it helps produce.<sup>277</sup> I argue that the regime's envy of the collective *jouissance* of the *Gezi* Protests generates a mimetic reproduction of protest in an attempt to give life to "a people" that the populist regime at once claims and yet also desires and constitutively lacks.

### **Crafting a counter-equivalent**

Engaging in joyful acts of resistance, the *Gezi* protestors deployed playful, humorous, and inventive slogans and practices that became iconic symbols of their mobilization—a point to which



I return in the following chapter. These symbols did not attract *AKP* supporters, who were absent from the mass mobilizations of summer 2013. This demarcation between the resisting dissent and the core constituency of the regime, however, was not always so clear. When it was established in the early 2000s, the *AKP* was considered to be the voice of the streets, articulating and mediating popular grievances in urban peripheries at the grassroots level against the secular power-holding elite.<sup>278</sup> By 2013, after more than a decade in power as the single governing party with control over state apparatuses, material wealth, clientelist networks, and a steady conservative electoral base, the *AKP* had become the establishment. No longer able to claim to be “pitting the pure people against the elite,” the party, with its power and prestige, had become distant from the affective returns of resistance and popular mobilization.<sup>279</sup>

The failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 enabled the *AKP* to address this problem. According to the government’s narrative, which is generally accepted in public opinion, the coup was planned by a faction of the army, followers of the cleric Fethullah Gülen. This well-organized community had been part of the *AKP*’s ruling bloc, providing the party with an educated elite for its bureaucratic, military, and judicial posts, as well as a provincial pious entrepreneurial class, the backbone of bourgeois-Islamic civil society.<sup>280</sup> During the years of alliance between Erdoğan’s *AKP* and the Gülen Community (from 2002 to early 2010s), the party consolidated its political rule by dismantling the secular establishment, in large part through a series of high-profile trials charging military officers, journalists, lawyers, and academics with planning a coup against civilian political rule. The prosecutions and arrests, as Koray Caliskan puts it, “produced more political heat than justice,” while “opening the entire civilian and military bureaucracy to the followers” of Gülen, who replaced the ousted secularists.<sup>281</sup>

Beginning in late 2013, however, signs of a split between the *AKP* and the Gülenists began to emerge in a “graft probe into Erdoğan’s entourage,” to which Erdoğan responded with a “massive anti-Gülenist purge across state institutions.”<sup>282</sup> For the next three years, an accelerating internal scramble for power between the Gülenists and Erdoğan paved the way for the July 15 coup, which, to this day, is veiled in opacity, especially with respect to the question of how much Erdoğan knew about the planned takeover, and why it was executed so poorly. Whether the coup attempt truly posed an existential threat to the regime, as Erdoğan claimed, can be left to one side in order to address a less speculative question, namely, what the *AKP* made of the coup. As indicated, my claim is that the government sought to use the coup to create in its constituency the kind of collective desire that animated and activated the people of *Gezi*.

The coup started on a Friday, in prime time. “Televised, tweeted and FaceTimed,” it unfolded hour by hour before millions.<sup>283</sup> Around 10 p.m. a group of soldiers closed off the Bosphorus Bridge (now called July 15 Martyrs' Bridge) connecting the part of Istanbul in Europe to the part in Asia. An hour later, while fighter jets flew over the capital, Ankara, and Bosphorus, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim confirmed the coup attempt. The key moment of the night was an on-air smartphone interview with Erdoğan on FaceTime, during which he called the “nation” to “go to the streets and give [the army] their answer.” Answering his call, people flowed into the streets. Major clashes between the military and protestors—the majority of whom were *AKP* supporters—occurred in Istanbul, particularly around the Bridge, where 34 civilians lost their lives.<sup>284</sup>

Although the official government narrative gives a triumphalist portrait of the coup’s failure—it failed due to popular resistance—the details are less straightforward. Carefully recollecting the sequence of events that night, Banu Bargu argues, for example, that fissures in the

chain of command—officers refusing orders to shoot civilians—ultimately aborted the coup.<sup>285</sup> In any case, thousands of civilian protestors put their bodies in the path of military vehicles, performing a mode of resistance that had never before taken place in Turkey’s notoriously rich history of military takeovers.<sup>286</sup> After the chaos, confusion, and turmoil were over, this popular resistance would become the momentous event to be remembered about that night and the central theme of the Democracy Watches.

I spent the summer of 2016 in Istanbul and Ankara, observing the Watches in the evenings and wandering around the cities in the daytime, using public transportation, walking across bridges, overpasses, underpasses, coach terminals and public parks, all of which, loaded with signs of the coup attempt, enacted a living memory of that night. Mobile exhibitions dotted the landscapes of both cities, displaying, in photographs and paintings, scenes of clashes between civilians and the military. I walked by “martyrs’ walls” listing the names of those killed while struggling against the coup, and billboards announcing prize competitions for resistance-themed literary works. Public vehicles carried slogans like “July 15 is the footsteps of the millions.” In the parks and squares designated for Democracy Watches, giant screens played Erdoğan’s public addresses or exhibited “protestor selfies,” which were also shared through social media accounts #PeopleWritingLegend, #Democracy, #WeTheNation.

To be sure, the Watches were not the first occasion that the *AKP* utilized mass mobilization. The party has a history of “National Will” rallies characterized by impassioned popular expressions of loyalty and attachment to the regime. However, the Watches differed from these previous gatherings insofar as they cast “the people” as protagonists, celebrating the popular resistance of July 15 alongside the longevity of the party and Erdoğan’s leadership. The emphasis on the heroic resistance of the people taking to the streets instantiated the party’s claims for

‘national will’ with a tangible reference, endowing the phenomenon of “the people” with an “affective and corporeal substance.”<sup>287</sup> The mobilization at the Watches produced its own mythical images and heroic tales about the night of the coup that blended fact and fiction following familiar tropes of Turkey’s 1919-1923 War of Independence. By constructing analogies between national independence and resistance against the coup, the *AKP* tapped into Sunni-nationalist sentiments to enact a myth of a second founding.<sup>288</sup> Ironically, the anti-coup Watches, also had a certain militarized flavor to them, not far removed from the cultural legacy of previous military takeovers, one of which had for a while been celebrated as the national “Freedom and Constitution Day.”<sup>289</sup>

Even though much of the visual and discursive repertoire of July 15 was borrowed from romantic nation-making historiography, the *Gezi* Protests were the real yardstick of that night’s affective glamor. Many slogans on banners and chanted by crowds at the Watches were disparaging derivatives of *Gezi*’s dissident language, reflecting Erdoğan’s comparisons between the people mobilized at *Gezi* and the people mobilized on the night of the coup. Most sympathetic journalistic accounts, too, “compared every aspect of [the resistance to the coup attempt] to *Gezi*, claiming that, in contrast with *Gezi*, theirs was a ‘true’ resistance.”<sup>290</sup> *Gezi*, in my view, was the most convenient object for comparison not least because of its symbolic value as an exemplar of civil resistance in the highly polarized political landscape of Turkey.

One way to read the simultaneous tension and subtle similitude between the movements is as a counterpoise against the political imaginary of *Gezi*, which is still capable of mobilizing oppositional desires. For example, Josh Carney projects *Gezi* and the Watches as two distinct social forces, with contrasting imaginaries of community seeking to change the politics of Turkey.<sup>291</sup> In the case of the Watches, Carney points to a dual production of a crowd-image by the use of large screens live-streaming the protestors. These screens, through onsite displays and

national broadcasting, both *reflect* an image of a public from above and also *project* a “particular version of that public,” guided and directed by the political authority.<sup>292</sup> Materialized and circulating, this image, Carney argues, was fundamental to displacing iconic images of the *Gezi* protestors at *Taksim* Square, captured similarly from above. Symbolically, the Watches were a “reply to Gezi,”<sup>293</sup> or, rather, the “*Gezi* moment” of Erdoğan’s supporters<sup>294</sup>—an intuition, which I share with numerous *Gezi* participants. They generated an alternative image, experience, and memory of popular protest for the enjoyment of the *AKP* electorate, diverging from what *Gezi* had displayed in its oppositional alliance.

By drawing *AKP* supporters to the streets, the Watches revealed not an “abstract ideal” of a people but an “embodied” popular force.<sup>295</sup> One way to read this active and embodied political participation, following Bargu, is as a new form of consent that supplements electoral expressions of popular will with bodily assemblies in the public square.<sup>296</sup> Just as Carl Schmitt envisioned public acclamations as immediate expressions of the people’s constituent power, the *AKP* might be seen to be using the Watches as a legitimating source for its authority.<sup>297</sup> For people to “express their consent,” to “be represented,” and to become “a political entity,” they first “must be *present*.”<sup>298</sup>

Recognizing the Schmittian resonances and agreeing with Bargu about the transformation of the numerical electorate into an embodied assembly through the Watches, I see an additional shift of focus. In my view, at stake in the transformation of an electoral aggregate to a bodily collective is less a question of consent *per se*, which the *AKP* already claimed to possess and acted as if it possessed in virtue of its electoral mandate. The issue is rather what the party wanted for itself *beyond consent*, and also what it could offer the people from whom it derived its mandate. I see the party as longing for a synergetic enjoyment with its electorate through the creation of a

popular front. This bidirectional mode of engagement with the “people” fundamentally differs from the more unidirectional practices of consent and/or submission.

Though not antithetical to what might be an instrumental calculation on the part of the regime, the orchestration of the Democracy Watches demonstrates a ‘surplus’ that cannot be sufficiently captured by material interest—a surplus of desire and enjoyment.<sup>299</sup> Curated to celebrate not only the regime but also the resistant people of July 15, *AKP*’s Democracy Watches bring into view what a populist-authoritarian regime seeks *for* its constituencies beyond what it seeks from them: a collectivity that understands itself as *a people*, insurgent, spontaneous, incipient.

The Watches thus open up a new problem-space for political theory that requires approaching peoplehood not only as a category of authorization, democratic will, and/or legitimacy, as we saw in the previous chapter, but as a category of collective desire and vitality. Although my dual taxonomy does not propose a strict separation between these categories, it is nonetheless necessary for bringing into view the surplus that popular mobilization produces. Public performances, disclosing a desire materialized in collective action, generate a synergetic pleasure and enjoyment. When, from standing, moving, and/or chanting together, assembled people see themselves as part of a collectivity, their desires circulate, vitalize, and generate power. As Jason Frank explains, citing A.V. Lunacharsky and Robespierre: “The people must see themselves assembled in order to feel their power.”<sup>300</sup>

Enjoying their belonging to a “mobilized and empowered collectivity,”<sup>301</sup> the dissenters of *Gezi* produced a “people” from below through popular participation and in a way that exceeds discourses of electoral legitimation. On my analysis, the regime, having witnessed this making of a people from below, sought to create an analogous site of collective action to bond its supporters

both to one another and to it through affective self-affirmation and political self-subjectivization. Imitating the *Gezi* protestors' expressive and performative practices, the orchestrated Democracy Watches sought to fabricate a counter-equivalent to the collective desire that the *Gezi* protestors had generated three years earlier. Producing both resemblance and distinction, the Watches recalled *Gezi* while also being different in terms of their organization, collective practices and sensibilities. To unfold the *AKP* regime's emulative production, I turn next to envy and mimesis.

### **Conceptual borrowings: envy and mimetic desire**

Melanie Klein defines envy as an “angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it.”<sup>302</sup> This basic definition draws the contours of envy with respect to two main determinants: the source of the feeling, and its malicious effects. Envy, coupled with greed, leads a subject to a persecutory anxiety and, often, destructive impulses.<sup>303</sup> What rouses envy is beyond one's hope of acquisition; thus, the wish for ownership over something that cannot be taken away from an other serves only to increase frustration.<sup>304</sup> Unattainability differentiates envy from jealousy. If jealousy is a fear of losing what one has and loves,<sup>305</sup> envy, unable to attain what cannot be had, seeks not only to confiscate the good qualities that the other possesses but to spoil the primal good object, the source of enjoyment, or the other's capacity for enjoyment, to deplete the other purposefully so that there no longer exists anything enviable.<sup>306</sup> When envy is intense, no ideal object can remove the despair. The despair of the envious subject, convinced that “there is no hope of love or help from anywhere,” becomes a source of endless persecution.<sup>307</sup>

Drawing on Kleinian insights, and also attending to the element of “enjoyment,” *jouissance* for Jacques Lacan, Joan Copjec claims that what is really at stake in envious attachments is envy's orientation towards the desire of an other rather than toward the other's object of desire.<sup>308</sup> What

I conceptualize as *Gezi*-envy builds upon Copjec's nuanced distinction between envying a desire and envying an object of desire, a distinction that depends on how Copjec disarticulates envy and jealousy. Copjec approaches envy through an analysis of a classic *film-noir*, *Laura*. In the 1944 movie, the main male character, Waldo Lydecker, finds out that his "most admiring devotee," Laura, has started spending her nights with another man, Jacoby.<sup>309</sup> From this discovery on, the film tracks decay, as Lydecker commits himself to destroying not only Jacoby, but also Laura—the "primal good object," in Klein's terms. Copjec rejects explanations of this path of destruction in terms of Lydecker's longing for a "sexual involvement with Laura that is missing from his relation to her, but which Jacoby apparently enjoys." To Copjec, Lydecker's frequent expressions of disgust about sexual affairs show him to be "not jealous of Jacoby" but "*envious* of him."<sup>310</sup> What we see in the movie, in Copjec's account, is Lydecker's envy of Jacoby's enjoyment of what he has, unaccompanied by any desire to have the same thing in the same way.

Klein and Copjec both turn to Crabb's English Synonyms for the difference between envy and jealousy: "Jealousy fears to lose what it has; envy is pained at seeing another have that which it wants for itself."<sup>311</sup> The dictionary offers a good starting point, but, in Copjec's view, it is incomplete, because envy's lack cannot be filled by the possession of the object that the other has. Or, as Copjec most concisely puts it, "envy envies satisfaction, enjoyment."<sup>312</sup> The impasse of envy can be formulated in terms of what I want to call a problem of inappropriability: If one's envy were of an object, one could develop strategies to "steal it away from another."<sup>313</sup> Because one envies the pleasure or enjoyment that the other has, however, every solution is inadequate other than either annihilating the other or submitting the other to the same proscription on enjoyment that one suffers oneself. In Klein and Copjec's accounts, the response to the unattainability of the other's pleasure is either annihilation or persecutory anxiety.



There could be a third possible response to the envied enjoyment that cannot be stolen, however, namely envious emulation. I theorize this third possibility using René Girard's perceptive account of the relationship between envy and mimesis. If Girard, like Copjec, takes envy to be of the other's desire, the *jouissance* of the other lacked by the envier, he adds to the analysis a new possible response to envy—emulation—by offering a new interpretation of the other.<sup>314</sup> For Girard, the other is not merely the one whose desire is envied, but also *the model*, whose gestures, behaviors, and styles are imitated for the sake of the envied desire.<sup>315</sup> Against “all our theories of conflict, and even our language, [which] reflect the commonsense view that the more intense the conflict, the wider the separation between the antagonists,” Girard argues that antagonism actually operates on the opposite principle: “The more intense the conflict, the less room for difference in it.”<sup>316</sup> In this convergence, the other is at once model, obstacle, and rival, performing, exhibiting, and exciting desire, while, at the same time, obstructing desire's satisfaction by blocking access to the desired object. Referring to this affective condition in which the absolute enemy becomes the mirrored idol as the “model-obstacle” form of mimetic desire, Girard inverts dichotomies between intimacy and alterity, friend and enemy, revealing the simultaneity of enmity and emulation.<sup>317</sup>

Extending Copjec's understanding of envy and Girard's model of mimetic desire, the next sections return to Turkey's political authority for its inverse fidelity to the *Gezi* Resistance. As I indicated earlier, my account brings to view economies of desire and envy that circulate across the *AKP* party apparatus, leadership, and *AKP*'s constituencies. After revisiting the *AKP* regime's preoccupation with *Gezi* as an envy of collective *jouissance*, and unpacking *Gezi*'s *jouissance* through its material experiences, I show how that *jouissance* becomes the model for the regime's rivalrous reproduction of *Gezi* through mimetic desire.

## The regime and another “people”

The brief history of the *AKP* regime shows that the party’s majoritarian populism goes hand in hand with its repression of political opposition. Of all the countries in the world, Turkey has the most jailed journalists, a jailed leader of a major political party, and numerous academics, activists, and students jailed or in exile.<sup>318</sup> This coincidence between dissident political activism and political repression, while not surprising, does not receive the scrutiny it should. Copjec’s conceptualization of envy helps explain this coincidence by offering a productive site from which to examine authoritarianism in relation to dissident mobilizations. My argument is that the *AKP* regime’s heightened repression and sporadic defamation of mobilized dissent manifests its envious attempt to pacify and annihilate the enjoying other, here, the political opponents of the regime, at any cost. This oppressive political climate can be deciphered in terms of its envious undertones particularly if put in relation to the party’s confidence in its popular base and its superiority at the polls. To see this, let me replay Copjec with a twist.

Erdoğan and other *AKP* members indicate again and again that they see electoral results as conclusive evidence of the party’s legitimacy and popular support. As long as the electorate ratifies the governing power, the party possesses sovereign power, the popular title by which it identifies itself. If “the people” is the object of desire that structures the conduct of a governing authority in an electoral democracy, then, insofar as the party’s claim to popular sovereignty is underwritten by its own regime of legitimacy, the *AKP* cannot, within Copjec’s terms, be *jealous* of the *Gezi* protestors. What, then, to make of the repeated references to *Gezi* in the speeches of Erdoğan and other party officials?

On my interpretation, the *AKP* regime *envies* *Gezi*, seeing in *Gezi* a making of a “people” it lacks. Borrowing Copjec’s logic, the ‘object’ that the governing authority possesses and desires

to possess—namely the electorate—and the ‘enjoyment’ it desires—the *jouissance* that belongs to the resistance—are not the same thing. The authority wants to foreclose dissenters from enjoying that desire and it wants for itself the desire that the dissent enjoyed. Authorized to govern in the name of the people, the party may own a popular title through representation. In the highly polarized political landscape of Turkey, the government is also capable of reserving that popular title for its supporters by marginalizing dissenters. What it does not own, however, is what the dissenters generate through their “collective desire for collectivity,”<sup>319</sup> the enjoyment of a solidarity and public visibility that attenuates individualized burdens of political exclusion. This collective *jouissance* is “altogether foreign” to the governing authority, insofar as it emerges from the ground up and from the political subjectivities of the dissenting people themselves.<sup>320</sup> Unable to generate it for its own constituencies, the *AKP* desires and envies the collective *jouissance* enjoyed by the Gezi protestors.

The psychoanalytic distinction between “jealousy” and “envy” may be seen in this way to map onto a distinction between two conceptions of “the people.” One—analogue to jealousy—treats the people as an object of representation, identification, and entitlement over which competing parties and groups engage in hegemonic contestation. In this sense, the people institute a legally authorizing and legitimating entity. As we saw in the previous chapter, theories of performative assembly and populist identification, offered by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, conceptualize peoplehood primarily in these terms. The other, like envy, treats the people as an *inappropriable non-object* that is experienced and enjoyed in practice. Relying on aggregate expressions of popular support from election to election, the governmental authority in Turkey can and does claim to speak in the name of the people in the first sense. The relationality between “the

people” as a title and entitlement, and the institutional bodies that seek that entitlement, constitutes the realm of *popular sovereignty* by the principle of *possession*.

Another figure of a people, which may be conceptualized in terms of social capacities, affective forces and energies, is brought into being by mobilization. This figure has the source of its motion and power in itself and demonstrates a vitality and pleasure in realizing this power. This “people” belongs to what I call an economy of desire that exceeds “the people” as authorizing source. The excess of this desire manifests as the collective experience of pleasure. As Hannah Arendt once put it, “acting is fun.”<sup>321</sup> Participation in collective action opens up for those who dissent a new dimension of experience that is otherwise closed to them, what Arendt calls “public happiness.”<sup>322</sup> From the perspective of the electoral authority, this pleasure of being and acting together is enjoyed by *another* people.

Drawing on Elias Canetti, Jodi Dean describes mass assemblies of people as a “strange attractor of *jouissance*, a figure of collective enjoyment.”<sup>323</sup> She predicates this libidinal energy among strangers on physical density—“where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body.”<sup>324</sup> This density, Dean argues, leads to a feeling of intimacy, relief and, ultimately, equality.<sup>325</sup> When mass protests give rise to *jouissance*, what makes them distressing for political authorities, I suggest, is not only the shadow they cast on those authorities’ claims to rule in the name of the people, but also the very existence of “the people” the authorities claim. This is because, as I explore next through an analysis of the *Gezi* Protests, the *jouissance* of mass protest makes publicly visible a collectivity whose members share both an immediate turbulence of feelings—from rage and discontent to euphoria and hope—and also a set of communal “intermediating practices,” which are capable of transforming ordinary collective activities into

festive performances.<sup>326</sup> This is a collectivity that the populist regime, despite its electoral mandate, constitutively lacks and also desires.

***Gezi*: “just ordinary people doing something extraordinary”<sup>327</sup>**

*Gezi* stands as a milestone in the collective memory of the half of the population of Turkey that is discontented with the government. The sources of discontent paving the way to *Gezi*, as I previously noted, were manifold, including the government’s interference in citizens’ lives, its patriarchal and heteronormative control of gender relations, its suppression of freedom of the press, expression, and assembly, its enclosure of public spaces and environmental destruction. Living under successive terms of the *AKP*’s single-party rule and gripped by its ‘ballot-box supremacy’ logic, the opposition—the “losing side” of elections—oscillated between “optimistic anticipation for the situation to change and the ensuing disillusionment of it not happening.”<sup>328</sup> Oscillation pushes dissident individuals to despair in their separate households, workspaces, and classrooms. Collective mobilization disrupts this individualized experience, creating alliances and commonalities across different injuries, struggles, aspirations and exasperations. In this respect, the *Gezi* Protests marked the opening of a new space, where opponents of the regime, organized or unaffiliated, could communicate their discontent publicly.

Acting upon their desire to change the course of politics, *Gezi* protestors mitigated the subjective conditions of separateness into a collectivity that acted and spoke together. Dean attends to such “negation of individuality, separateness, boundaries, and limit,” describing the “presence” of crowds at protests as a “positive expression of negation.”<sup>329</sup> The atmosphere of protests, expectations and excitement, according to Dean, brings about an “affective sensibility” that “becomes desirable in itself.”<sup>330</sup> Dean theorizes this affective sensibility as an immediate outcome of the crowd’s physical presence and density, rather than as an outcome of, for instance, practices

of common use or reciprocal relations that are common to occupational forms of protest. This leads her to describe the protesting crowds as egalitarian but not yet political.<sup>331</sup>

Less and more hopeful than Dean, I find in *Gezi* a collective desire that was not necessarily, or always, egalitarian, or released from conventional hierarchies. And yet, in my view, it was political insofar as the protestors were continually responsive to and responsible for one another, negotiating their differences and disagreements, sustaining a heterogenous sociality that supported a politics of deliberative judgement, reciprocal learning and understanding. Despite this difference, I agree with Dean on desire, as I find in the assembled masses at *Gezi* a “joyous belonging” and a transferential desire to a space of their own making.<sup>332</sup>

In Summer 2013, *Gezi* protestors were crossing thresholds by refusing the demarcations of the permissible—where they could stay, for how long and with what authority; what could they demand, write, and draw. Their transgressions dynamically generated a shared sense of power and strength, which accelerated, rapidly and immensely, in reaction to the government’s coercive response. Extreme police brutality led to a corporeal experience of solidarity among protestors through intensification of physical proximity, much like Canetti describes a crowd’s coalescence into a heterogenous unity.<sup>333</sup> Strangers to one another, protestors—some of them protesting for the first time—found themselves in an overwhelming fog of tear gas, stampede and chaos, and yet they often acted to protect those under imminent threat of police violence. During clashes with police, they coordinated efforts to shelter, shield, and medicate protestors who urgently needed help.<sup>334</sup> Such unpremeditated acts of care constituted the basis of solidarities which emerged before organizational, playful and festive relations developed.

Outside zones of conflict, protesting groups formed assemblies of work, debate, creation, and performance. These occupied sites hosted a variety of communal activities on mass scales with

unparalleled commitment and compromise. *Gezi* Park, the most carnivalesque of all the protest sites, had its own library, several mobile kitchens, and supply centers providing free protest essentials. The Park had its own daily paper, which reported ‘protest diaries’ and schedules of daily events, such as an ‘alternative swear words’ workshop to revise the sexist language of some of the dissidents. Altogether, *Gezi* was a rotational experience, from violent conflict at the barricades to collective participation in ordinary activities like camping, cooking, cleaning, reading, exercising, gardening, praying, dancing (Figure 5). This rotation inspired new urban aesthetics, as protestors repurposed a great number of public transportation vehicles, billboards, bus stops, street walls and pavements into canvases for street art. These vast canvases displayed commemorative comments about the lost lives of the resistance as well as examples of disproportionate use of humor as an antidote to the state’s disproportionate use of coercion to which I return in the next chapter.

The use of public spaces for collective purposes formed a sense of belonging to a community. The social capacities and desires at work in these spaces constituted what I am calling *another* people, one that was different from “the people” defined by the government through majoritarian victories at the polls. The significance of this other people, who dissented and mobilized, was not reducible to their numbers, or to whether or not they could change the government. The protestors did not owe their power to an ability to claim the title of “the people” at the expense of other sectors from different sides of the electorate. Instead, they derived their power from their desire for their own togetherness, their solidarism in danger and peace, at work and at rest.

In the years between the 2013 *Gezi* Protests and the 2016 coup attempt, the *AKP* gained notable electoral victories, including the 2014 local and presidential elections and 2015

parliamentary elections, though not without tilting the playing field in its favor. Having at first lost the parliamentary majority in June 2015, the party went for a snap election the following November and re-instituted its single-party rule for a fourth term. This electoral success cannot be understood apart from Erdoğan's "growing attacks on opposition activists, particularly the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*HDP*)"<sup>335</sup>—a party that, following *Gezi*, broadened its platform by addressing a plurality of issues, including the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, women, and LGBTQ individuals, economic equity, and environmental justice. Between June and November 2015, Erdoğan put an end to peace talks with the Kurdish Liberation Movement and escalated post-election violence to regain conservative votes. Relying increasingly on social polarization and criminalizing dissent, *AKP* rule devolved into what scholars of democratic reversal call "competitive authoritarianism."<sup>336</sup> Despite the growing chasm between *AKP* voters and opponents, Erdoğan secured a majority in the 2017 constitutional referendum that established a strong executive presidency. The following year, he was re-elected as president by majority vote.

Within this conjuncture, the 2016 coup attempt provided the *AKP* with a unique opportunity. While its electoral mandate, sustained by the suppression of political opposition, became increasingly characterized by efforts to hold onto power by any means, the attempted coup and subsequent popular mobilization granted the party the chance to cast itself as a bastion of democracy threatened by internal and external conspirators. This narrative enabled the *AKP* to heighten its delegitimation campaign of the opposition by, for instance, revalorizing the label "civilian coup" that Erdoğan persistently uses for *Gezi*.<sup>337</sup> It also helped the party energize its people by calling them into action to save the "democratic nation" and side with its wronged but dignified leader. The Watches, for their part, theatrically produced mobilizational momentum, giving ordinary supporters of the *AKP* the pleasure of being part of something eminently collective



and historical. Just as dissenters had *Gezi*, “an unprecedented moment” underwritten by a “commonality of feeling” and the “making of a community in its flesh and bones,”<sup>338</sup> so could *AKP* loyalists have July 15, another moment in which a different community was assembled and activated in its flesh and bones.

### **From enemy to model**

Insofar as the desire generated through immediate, mediating, and intermediating activities of protestors is something that a political authority cannot appropriate, it remains for that authority a source of envy. The *AKP* regime’s *Gezi*-envy takes two different shapes. One, exemplifying the persecutory anxiety in Klein and Copjec’s analyses, is, as we have seen, its ongoing vilification of the opposition, which is commonly interpreted as a populist “Manichean worldview” dividing the populace into “us” vs. “them.”<sup>339</sup> What a Manichean worldview leaves unexplained, however, is the flip side of the antagonistic intensity—that is, the governing authority’s mimetic appropriation of the *Gezi* Protests. While maligning *Gezi* protestors through strategies of polarization, the Turkish regime also adopted the protestors’ forms of action and speech. Such imitative rivalry, in Girard’s sense, appears most clearly in the regime’s attempts to recreate the resistance against the coup as its own collective desire.

The popular mobilization of July 15 opened the possibility of *jouissance* for the supporters of the existing order *without* disrupting that order. This possibility was quickly seized by the government—“a gift from God,” said Erdoğan<sup>340</sup>—to construct a symbolic, affective, and aesthetic landscape—the Democracy Watches—parallel to the one that emerged during *Gezi*. Imitating *Gezi*, the Watches were designed to mobilize desires and shore up resistant subjectivities, this time in support of the regime.

Such mobilizational efforts are not new to right-wing populism. As Corey Robin observes, right-wing populisms often display a particular “a taste and talent for the masses,” mobilizing the “energy and dynamism of the street” to the benefit of the elite.<sup>341</sup> It is also not unusual for such populisms to deploy vocabularies and ideas developed by the left: “To counter the left, the right has had to mimic the left.”<sup>342</sup> Reflecting this long tradition of appropriation, the *AKP* mimicked not only the language, but also the spatial, narrative, visual, and performative repertoires of the dissent. From epic narratives about clashes between civilians and the army during the coup attempt, to mass gatherings at public parks and squares with music, food, tents, forums, and banners, these post-coup protests, attended by regime supporters, were competitive replications of the material universe of *Gezi*.

Following the script of Erdoğan’s speeches, the July 15 protestors explicitly differentiated themselves from the *Gezi* protestors while retaining *Gezi* in close proximity as a negative model for comparison. For instance, playing on the word, ‘*Gezi*,’ which translates literally as wandering or travelling, the banners of pro-regime youth organizations at the Watches read: “Stable youth, not wanderers” (“*Gezici değil, kalıcı gençlik*”; Figure XX). This new slogan was, at once, a hail to the party as an anchor of order and stability, and also an attack on *Gezi*, associating its dissidents with flightiness and ephemerality. Erdoğan’s words about the *Gezi* protestors— “looters,” those who don’t “love their country,” those with “ill intentions”— became, through repetition and difference, what Ahmed calls, “*sticky*,” that is, they “stuck” to *Gezi* as the regime’s disparaged but not forgotten ‘other,’ while simultaneously sticking regime supporters to one another.<sup>343</sup>

Another chanted phrase at the Watches, “Tayyip is everywhere, Erdoğan is everywhere” (“*Her yer Tayyip, her yer Erdoğan*”) mirrored *Gezi*’s widely-circulating slogan, “Everywhere is *Taksim*, resistance is everywhere” (“*Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş*”) implying that Erdoğan could

actuate desires similar to those of the political dissent. In addition to constructing protest around the persona of the leader, the chant also hinted at an envious desire to permeate the political imagination as widely as had the *Gezi* Protests. In fact, this was not the first time that Erdoğan's *AKP* used imitated versions of *Gezi* slogans for self-promotion. In Fall 2013, preparing for the municipal elections of March 2014, the party started off its electoral campaign in Istanbul with the slogan "Subway everywhere, subway to everywhere" ("Her yer metro, her yere metro") plastered across the visual landscape of the metropolitan area. As part of the *AKP*'s claims to belong to and be at "service" ("*hizmet*") of "the people," the campaign slogan was deployed to contradistinguish the *AKP* government, which delivers (subway) services to Istanbulers, from the *Gezi* protestors, who had vandalized and destructed their own city.<sup>344</sup>

These appropriations and distortions of *Gezi* slogans can be read, with Girard, as "ever renewed mimetic duplications" of *Gezi*,<sup>345</sup> or as many others have said, "a specter [of *Gezi*] still haunting Erdoğan's New Turkey."<sup>346</sup> Before the post-coup Watches, *Gezi* held the status of enemy only. Signifying the opposition's dissident access to "the people," *Gezi* symbolized the constitution of a people "irreducible to a legally authorized or institutionally articulated collective" of electing and voting individuals, from which the *AKP* derived and continues to derive its political power.<sup>347</sup> As obstacles to the political authority, *Gezi* protestors enjoyed collective subjectivation at the expense of the regime's capacities to incite an analogous desire for the—electoral—people it represents.<sup>348</sup>

The Watches turned *Gezi* into a *model* for a mimetic desire that duplicated those social and affective capacities in the service of the political authority. *Gezi* protestors became redefined as rivals to be outdone on the very grounds of their enviable qualities. If the barricades were the material and figurative markers of the power of the people of *Gezi*, the governing authority imitated

and also sought to surpass these by turning bridges and highways into markers of the power of the people who resisted the coup on July 15. If the *Gezi* protestors used urban parks and squares during long summer nights to speak up and bear witness to their desires and imaginations, the regime sought to turn these same spaces into sites in which its supporters could envision themselves as a unified popular body, a “realization” and “materialization” of the idea of a people “interwoven with the state.”<sup>349</sup>

The Watches’ “mimetic duplications” did not create sameness with *Gezi*. *Gezi* owed its festive atmosphere to communal activities and performances that aimed to liberate spaces from state intervention and statist imaginaries. The Watches, by contrast, were designed, directed, and funded by the *AKP* to create allegiance to the state.<sup>350</sup> The collective desire that the regime sought to incite, therefore, was absorbed into a collective desire for the leader rather than for the collectivity itself. The appropriated *Gezi* slogans succinctly point to this absorption by describing an omnipresent Erdoğan seizing the desiring bonds among people to redirect them back to himself to create a *stabilized* desire rather than one that *wanders*.<sup>351</sup>

The qualitative differences between the Watches and *Gezi* do not imply a gap in mimetic duplication—mimesis itself can accommodate both similitude and difference<sup>352</sup>—but point rather to the envious character of the regime’s mimetic production. Consider that at the Watches the crowds were repeatedly reminded by organizers taking the stage that “everybody was there” regardless of their political view, ethnicity, age, or religious identity. The party’s emphasis on difference and diversity was shared by its supporters who took pride in being part of a “reconciled,” “organic” nation.<sup>353</sup> For *AKP* voters, July 15 embodied the unification of diverse segments of society, much like *Gezi* did for the opposition. Just as *Gezi* participants and sympathetic viewers celebrate its unique assemblage of diverse groups, so do regime supporters remember and

memorialize July 15 as a moment that “*everybody*—rightists and leftists, Alevis and Sunnis, Kurds, Arabs, and even the Syrian immigrants—were in the streets.”<sup>354</sup>

This praise of a unified heterogeneity, which was, however, inconsistent with the visual *homogeneity* of nationalist signs and symbols at the Watches, expresses *Gezi*-envy precisely in virtue of the absence of the praised object. What made *Gezi* distinctively diverse was the coexistence of LGBTQ activists queering old socialist chants, feminists correcting sexist slogans, Kurds with Kurdish flags, soccer fans in their club uniforms, together manifesting a “unity in difference.”<sup>355</sup> Exhibiting a desire for the enjoyment that dissidents derived from the pluralist public space of *Gezi* but not for the object of that enjoyment, the *AKP* regime staged a set of mimetic performances, appropriating, and at times subverting, the democratic qualifications of *Gezi*.

### **Staged democracy**

There was an abundance of “democracy” in Turkey during the summer of 2016. Alongside the Democracy Watches, thousands across the country participated in “Democracy Marches.” In Istanbul, pro-regime demonstrators marched over the Bosphorus Bridge. A “Democracy and Martyrs Rally” took place at *Yenikapı* Square under the auspices of the Presidency, Istanbul Governorship and Metropolitan Municipality. Many other such rallies were organized across Anatolia. Opening and/or closing with the national anthem, these democracy-themed gatherings included a series of musical performances—“democracy concerts”—at times interrupted by passionate speeches by Erdoğan and other *AKP* members projected on large screens. Members of art, entertainment, and sports communities took the stage and/or featured in short video clips in support of the Turkish nation providing a “democracy lesson to the world.”<sup>356</sup> Individuals participating in the Watches were asked to document their thoughts and feelings in “democracy

diaries,” which were set up in front of the *AKP* tents and collected by party members to be published and distributed to the public.

The conspicuous emphasis on “democracy” is important. It carries an efficacious appeal, enticing people to remain in the streets, in protest. At the same time, its repeated use, unaccompanied by corroborating practices, corrodes the term’s meaning. The repertoires of collective action animating the *AKP*’s enchantment with democracy and evidenced in their implementation were skillfully appropriated from the *Gezi* Protests, yet without the self-organization and openness that *Gezi* had involved. As Bulent Kucuk and Buket Turkmen point out, the post-coup mobilizations, initially “spontaneous and creative,” quickly became “centrally organized and scheduled” events with “repetitive speeches held every night on the stage and the shouted slogans on the ground.”<sup>357</sup> The contrast between the Watches and *Gezi* was further evident in their respective approaches to ethnic and religious difference. Oversaturated by Sunni-nationalist symbols and vocabulary, the Watches felt exclusionary of and hostile to Alevi and Kurdish individuals, reminding them of bitter memories of state violence.<sup>358</sup> The monochromatic landscape at the Watches, dominated by the red Turkish flag, was a visual manifestation of the identity that “the people” of July 15 embodied. Despite the many appearances of “democracy” in the marches, diaries, forums, tents, and concerts, the post-coup mobilizations were not predicated on intermediating practices of public debate, cooperative work, creation, or learning—practices that constitute “democratic action in concert.”<sup>359</sup> Instead, they were orchestrated, scheduled, and managed by the party apparatus.

Centralized control over the content and contours of public deliberation constrained the political possibilities temporarily opened up by the post-coup mobilization. For instance, the significant women’s participation at the Watches—forty eight percent in Istanbul<sup>360</sup>—could have

generated public debate about gendered and sexualized violence in the context of a “masculinist military tradition and culture.”<sup>361</sup> There were also occasional but notable feminist/peace-activist interventions into the Watches calling attention to the ongoing human rights atrocities committed against the Kurdish populations in southeast Turkey with banners that read “coups can only be foiled by peace; women are against war.”<sup>362</sup> These interventions, as Feyza Akinerdem has pointed out, “transgressed the frames imposed on women’s visibility in a different way from *the majority* of the women at the vigils,” complicating the regime’s cooptation of popular mobilization.<sup>363</sup> Women inside the squares, however, remained largely inattentive to such transgressive interventions from outside. Nor did they discernibly seek to transform the Watches’ militaristic and patriarchal language from within. Making the “heroism of women” a central theme of its curated events, the *AKP* was able to maintain its managerial control over the terms of women’s representation and participation in street actions.<sup>364</sup>

Importantly, the “watch for democracy” ended in the same way it started, namely, at Erdoğan’s behest, approximately a month after its initiation.<sup>365</sup> One might wonder whether, had the Watches run a longer course, autonomous groups, like the feminist peace-activists, would have opened cracks and fissures within the fabricated space for protest, destabilizing its strictly managed economies of desire and imitation. It is not impossible to imagine, for example, that the obvious contrast between the heterogeneity the Watches claimed and their homogenizing approach to nationalism, religion, and gender could have, over time, impacted the regime’s capacity to sustain its Sunni-nationalist and hetero-patriarchal construction of peoplehood. Or that a more prolonged mobilization would have revealed the fragility of a centrally controlled popular participation, leaving the regime with unintended, even unmanageable, consequences.

What is less speculative and more important for my analysis is that the regime *did* open a space of mobilization and that it created that space in order to generate the synergetic enjoyment of popular assembly. Although “empty” and “almost grotesque,” the regime’s democratic gestures were nonetheless vital to the sought-after collective *jouissance* and peoplehood that, on my analysis, the Watches endeavored to enviously and mimetically produce.<sup>366</sup> The identification of July 15 with democracy provided the regime with the opportunity to ‘confiscate’ the primal goods of *Gezi*, namely the dissenters’ democratic experience and desires, so as to leave nothing to be envied.<sup>367</sup> The inverse image of democracy at the Watches facilitated an uneasy imitation of *Gezi*’s collective *jouissance*, allowing the *AKP* to transpose its majoritarian treatment of “the people” from the electoral field to the streets. Indexing democracy to a mythologized will of the nation, the regime sought to figure July 15 protestors as authentic protectors and practitioners of democratic politics, and thus to coalesce its popular mandate with an “insurgent politics of crowds.”<sup>368</sup> This dynamic, and also contested, investment in democracy reenchanting the constituencies of the party, making involvement in protest activities an emblem of pride.

Rather than a failure, the differing imaginaries of democratic action at *Gezi* and the Watches indicate a specific kind of mimesis, which conjugated a unique popular and populist energy for the *AKP* regime. Since “envy envies satisfaction, enjoyment” of the other, unaccompanied by any desire to have the same thing in the same way, what the regime wanted—a people enjoying its public, material, and embodied presence—did not need to be constituted through the same experiences and practices as “the people” of *Gezi*. In short, Girardian mimesis helps explain the regime’s attempt to produce collective desire and “the people” as a way to circumvent the impasses of its *Gezi*-envy. And Copjec’s conceptualization of envy helps nuance the kinds of desire and popular subjectivity produced at the Watches: activated and experienced



by an acclamation of the state, with its ethno-national markers and its leader, Erdoğan, as the “true embodiment of the general will,” the desire and subjectivity of the Watches simultaneously produced ordinary party voters as a collectivity.<sup>369</sup> Deemed “indispensable to the emotionalism of a Fascist regime” by Ernst Kantorowicz, such mass acclamations proved to be an effective solution for the *AKP*’s need for a collective *jouissance*, forging a constitutive nexus that united its people with one another and with their leader/party, both.<sup>370</sup>

### **Inversion of power and resistance: a travelling theory?**

Despite the gravity of certain facts left in the dark, the 2016 coup attempt ultimately worked to the benefit of the *AKP*. It provided the party with a strong anti-establishment narrative, even though the party itself had by then become the establishment and even though the armed threat to its mandate had not lasted more than a night.<sup>371</sup> Not dissimilar to contemporary conspiracist narratives in the U.S., which cast the former president Donald Trump as the *victim* of “a deep state bent on political coups, and a Democratic party plotting treason,” Erdoğan’s *AKP*, too, was able to conjure up a wronged but righteous popular identity, mobilizing the masses around victimhood and resistance against conspiracy.<sup>372</sup> The sheer irony of ‘watching for democracy’ in Turkey, while the country was being governed under a state of emergency—which would end only in 2018 with Erdoğan’s election as the first president of the new presidential system and after a series of mass purges across the public sector—speaks for itself.<sup>373</sup> More thought-provoking, though, is how the *AKP* could recast resistance to a potential military takeover as allegiance to the state. Orchestrating a festive and theatrical mass appearance, the Turkish regime was able to bring to life what William Mazzarella calls a “mattering forth of the collective flesh,”<sup>374</sup> or, in Frank’s terms, a “living image of the people,”<sup>375</sup> while appropriating and reterritorializing that flesh and image to itself in order to invigorate its attenuated identification with popular energies on the ground.

In my view, the aesthetic and affective economies of the Democracy Watches display the power of both “populism in the streets” and “populism in power,” frustrating the analytical distinction scholars sometimes draw between these two modalities of populist politics.<sup>376</sup> It is not unusual for populist outsiders to mobilize “anti-status quo” sensibilities in society, given that “at the heart of the populist appeal lies the imaginary constitution of popular identities in opposition to the established order.”<sup>377</sup> It is less common, however, for populists in power to summon such sensibilities. Turkey’s Democracy Watches manifested a new populism in power that was able to associate itself with the “theatre of the crowds in the streets.”<sup>378</sup> Thus, by studying the Watches as a convergence of populism as social movement (from below) and populism in power (authoritarian), this chapter sought to destabilize the instrumental and normative logics often invoked by democratic theorists, implicitly or explicitly, in their articulations of the meaning and significance of popular mobilization. Suggesting a focus shift away from the normative and instrumental underpinnings of predominant conceptualizations of peoplehood, I have offered a new framework centered around “collective desire” and “enjoyment,” the forces of which are available, even if in differential terms, to both dissenters and supporters of ruling administrations.

Whether the mimetic enjoyment of *AKP*’s populist politics can be sustained over time remains to be seen. In the case of the Democracy Watches, *AKP* voters, as we have seen, largely depended on the party leadership to animate their collective desire and enhance their visibility. This is a key difference from the *Gezi* protestors, who, by contrast, spontaneously appeared and continue to appear now and again in multifarious movements, marching and chanting in resistance to state-sanctioned policies ranging from femicide, homophobia and ethno-nationalism to neoliberal extractivism and environmental destruction.<sup>379</sup> While the lingering, or rather proliferating, afterlives of *Gezi* extend the dissident *jouissance* into the present, the *jouissance* of

July 15, so far at least, came to life for one month only, and has been sustained since 2016 through annual official memorials at designated times and places.

Unique as it is, Turkey's July 15 movement might portend a new disposition among populist authoritarian regimes, which may seek to collect the affective returns of resistance and popular mobilization that they see as deficits in their rule. We might, for example, construct cautious analogies between the Watches in Turkey and the anti-lockdown protests that took place in the U.S. and Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic. Though shorter in duration and more limited in scope, these protests displayed affective dynamics similar to the pro-regime gatherings in Turkey, tapping into synergetic and vitalizing energies of people assembled in resistance. With the "enemy" often found on familiar shores—a much maligned "deep state," bureaucratic institutions, and/or scientific expertise—populist parties and leaders seek to conjure insurgent desires through delegitimizing political opponents and acclaiming the regime.<sup>380</sup>

Indeed, the contemporary U.S., just like Turkey, presents an intricate, thus interesting, case to study mobilizational politics emergent from different sides of the electorate. Within a timespan of around six months (June 2020-January 2021), the country has been a stage, first, to months-long Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests after the news had been unraveled about the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and, then, to an insurgent attack at the U.S. Capitol, which is now also known as the "January 6 Capitol Riot." While all of these events require in-depth reflections that are beyond the scope of this chapter, a few aspects are worth highlighting for expanding the implications, if not applicability, of this chapter's arguments.

At stake in the January 6 Capitol attack, much like the Democracy Watches, was the making of a people that claims authenticity by way of its embodied and insurgent presence and protection of democracy, in the American case, from an invented electoral fraud. Revealingly, the

video recordings from January 6 (posted on pro-Trump social platform *Parlar*) feature insurgents who were shouting, “real Americans, right here; Americans”—not a mere numerical majority but true “patriots.”<sup>381</sup> Implicit as well in the electoral fraud conspiracy theories, commonly known as “the Steal,” was a set of assumptions about who had conspired in stealing: the *others* who are not “*real* Americans”—Blacks, immigrants, socialist progressives. As Fintan O’Toole, among others, has pointedly argued, the factuality of the claims about the fraud was of little importance, precisely because Trump had “abolished it in the realm of events” and “remade it in the realm of *collective identity*,”<sup>382</sup>—a realm, moreover, that would be consolidated by the “immersive experience” of the Capitol siege.<sup>383</sup>

Both in terms of its targeted others and immersive experience, the Capitol attack has reminded some commentators of previous Trump rallies.<sup>384</sup> Yet again, the Democracy Watches differed from ordinary party rallies of the *AKP* because they changed perhaps not the script but the protagonists. So too did the siege of the U.S. Capitol differ from regular campaign events by casting Trump supporters as the main actors of an ‘historic event.’ In this way, the siege, staging Trump’s White-supremacist rhetoric in-action, consummated the “experiential appeals” of the regular rallies—that is, a “participatory unfolding of the present,” improvised, intermediating, and binding.<sup>385</sup> Confederate flags, the “sticky” signs of White supremacist movements, were also accompanied by an inimical attachment to racial justice struggles. Evident in self-recorded video footage, numerous participants of the Capitol attack cited the summer 2020 BLM protests as a negative model for comparison—“hearing all summer long about city after city getting burned down.”<sup>386</sup> In doing so, they hinted at a retaliatory and reappropriative reply to BLM protests about who constitutes the (real) Americans, who the “patriots” are and who not. My intention here is not to construct an equivalency between these movements, but to underscore the contrasting visions

of peoplehood reflected in and projected by these two different embodied performances, not unlike what the *Gezi* Protests and Democracy Watches displayed in Turkey's native polarized political landscape.

Reflecting on the mass mobilizations for racial justice, Ghanaian American author Yaa Gyasi writes: "There was something legitimately beautiful about being in a multiracial, multigenerational, multiclass body of people who for months filled the streets, shouted and marched and defied."<sup>387</sup> In joining the protestors flooding the streets, Gyasi says, she "felt a million things all at once: moved and proud and hopeful and enraged and offended and hopeless."<sup>388</sup> Her reflections are not romantic. She does not, for instance, omit the fact that "Black Lives Matter—a reverent, simple, true phrase—can only be hollow in the mouths of those who cannot stomach black life, real life, when they see it at a school, at the doctor's office, on the side of the road," spaces that display the "dissonance" between protest chants and everyday practices.<sup>389</sup> Still, Gyasi, and thousands of others, *did* march, and not without the much-needed ambivalence and skepticism that the previous chapter also advocated. In marching, chanting, and holding up Black Lives Matter signs together, protestors across the U.S. manifested a collective joy and a desire for solidarism among a "multiracial, multigenerational, multiclass body of people." This joy, which cannot be stolen,<sup>390</sup> continues to inform the present as a model of togetherness—a people constituted in and through collective action.

To be sure, Turkey's Democracy Watches and the U.S. Capitol attack, as well as the *Gezi* and BLM protests, are situated in their respective political, social, historical, and cultural contexts, while embodying differential visions and aspirations, practices and performances. For once, albeit empty and grotesque, the democratic gestures of the Watches, unlike the Capitol attack, were far from targeting the country's democratic institutions and procedures—largely because those

institutions and procedures had already been crippled by other, extra/juridical, means. Nonetheless, the July 15 and January 6 mobilizations, with their “aesthetics of appearing”<sup>391</sup> *and* the affective energies that they derived from competitive/contrasting comparisons with perceived respective enemies, both call for a systematic engagement with the imbrications of populist-authoritarianism as a form of ‘political rule’ *and* ‘popular mobilization,’ as well as dissident resistance as a source of joy and desire for protesting crowds and a reminder of a lack for political authorities.

## **Conclusion**

What I conceptualized in this chapter as the *AKP* regime’s “*Gezi*-envy” through an analysis of the Democracy Watches discloses the significance of a politics in/of the streets, whether it takes the form of mass festive gatherings, informal popular assemblies, or collaborative spatial practices. The significance of the streets is irreducible to their emergence as a site of popular sovereignty and entitlement. When people come together ‘out of doors’—as *Gezi* protestors did and protestors around the world continue to do—their presence exposes the limitations of the ruling authority to represent “the people.” However, this relocation of popular will tells only half the story. The other half has to do with the affective and aesthetic conditions for the making of a people that enjoys its togetherness through visualized, vocalized, performative, and self-affirming expressions of its presence. This other half, constitutively lacked and also desired by the *AKP* regime, is about a collective joy that neither appropriates nor is appropriable.

The next two chapters will substantiate the “inappropriable” character of the *Gezi* Protests by articulating an account of “refusal” that is affirmative, empowering, and reconfigurative. I draw from a rich body of popular slogans and a playful video performance to theorize the protests’ aesthetic interventions as a meaning-making enterprise. Such an enterprise, I argue, invests in an

alternative sociality unbounded by statist imaginaries and vocabularies by transforming the extant conceptions of politics, power, authority, and dissent.



**Figure 5: Sema ceremony, *Gezi Park***

### Chapter 3: Down with grand narratives! Humor, sense, nonsense at *Gezi*

#### Introduction

“Down with some things” (“*Kahrolsun bazı şeyler*”) was a featured slogan of the *Gezi* Resistance. It was omnipresent in Turkey during summer 2013: on walls, pavements, and billboards, across social media—a circulation that connected physical walls to virtual ones.<sup>392</sup> Despite its popularity, particularly among young participants and sympathizers of the protest movement, its message did not seem to express any substantive political idea. At least at first sight. Stating neither what protestors demanded, nor what they refused, the slogan nevertheless became the most visible message during the protests.

The sentence was almost comical, an effect it owed to the pairing of an ostensibly robust trope, “down with,” with an indeterminate object, “*some* things.” Though a portion of this comical effect gets lost in translation, the noticeable joke of the slogan operates on the most common principle of humor, “incongruity,” rising from, in Kant’s formulation, a “sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”<sup>393</sup> The expectation of proper political content here—that follows the strong assertion, “down with”—is disappointed by the weak target, “some things.” What begins as a conventional script arrives at an unexpected end, subverting domination by the familiar over the “actuality” of protests.<sup>394</sup>

Further failing expectations, the protestors who came up with the slogan also used incorrect spelling, using for the word, “*bazi*” (some), its vocal (mis)pronunciation: “*bağzi*” (“ğ” is a silent letter), which does not have a meaning. Constructed through this vocal distortion, the slogan’s meaning becomes legible when placed in relation to the genealogy of the “down with” trope, a bedrock of grand narratives in Turkey: from the left’s “Down with capitalism!” “Down with



American imperialism!” “Down with fascism!”; to the “Down with Sharia!” and “Down with reactionists!” of secularist Kemalism; and the “Down with the *PKK*!” “Down with separatists!” of radical Turkish nationalism. What the different versions of the slogan have in common is an explicitly self-assured tone, precisely the missing element in the version deployed during *Gezi*. The object of condemnation by the *Gezi* protestors was nothing precise.

These disappointed expectations of the *Gezi*-slogan have been read as failures, signs of a “lack of a solid political orientation.”<sup>395</sup> I disagree with this reading. In my view, the slogan’s distortion of the conventional tone of political dissent was deliberate and it demonstrated a refusal of preexisting frames of thought and speech. In contrast to the absolutist nature of previous dissident repertoires, *Gezi*’s emblematic statement, “down with some things,” was, by design, apolitical and disinterested. Why would such a slogan become the voice of a summer-long popular mobilization? And, why would protestors, the majority young and unaffiliated, promote such an unserious slogan that would counterproductively reproduce their characterization in popular discourses as apathetic?

This chapter takes its point of departure from these questions. More specifically, thinking with and against Jacques Rancière, it examines the protestors’ refusals to speak in the language of the governmental power, what Rancière calls the *police*. I argue that this refusal did not merely resist the authoritarian policies of the *AKP* government, but also sought to alter the polarizing regimes of knowledge and rigidified subject positions shaping the social fabric of the republic. Examining why and how protestors searched for a new language of resistance, I theorize this quest as, at once, a Rancièrian re-configurative disruption, and, at the same time, illustrative of certain blind spots of Rancière’s theorization of the *political*. Deploying what is considered unworthy of attention—an unserious humor that playfully signals an incapacity for political speech rather than

the verification of such capacity—the *Gezi* protestors, in contrast with Rancière’s elaboration of *political* disruption, used the very sources of their exclusion, their own material-cultural world, to reclaim their part.

I articulate *Gezi*-humor in a variety of forms—comical, ludicrous, witty, provocative, unserious, nonsensical, ironic, and so on. While, at *Gezi*, each of these forms had different functions depending on their socio-cultural context and target of critique, they also, *together*, carved out a site for political dispute that was not predetermined by established political positions and sensibilities. I show how *Gezi*’s written and uttered “counter-narratives” materialized a polemical scene of dissensus that interrupted not only Erdoğan’s authority, but also the multicentric authorities and epistemic hierarchies of the *police*.<sup>396</sup> My account, therefore, effectively pluralizes Rancière’s *police* by analyzing the plural refusals that *Gezi*’s *politics* materializes. I disarticulate the pluralized *police* of Turkey into three essential constituents: Erdoğan and the current *AKP*-government; the Kemalist opposition of the former statist establishment; and Turkey’s socialist/revolutionary left, which had, prior to *Gezi*, been most active and visible in street protests although not in formal representative bodies.

Attending to its refusals on these multiple fronts, I read *Gezi* as the voice of a refusal of “the [choices] as offered.”<sup>397</sup> I present this refusal first in relation to the *AKP* administration’s claim to *know* and *represent* the best interests of “the people,” emphasizing the paternalistic undertones of that claim, in particular vis-à-vis the youth in Turkey. Second, I show how *Gezi* protestors replaced the serious, nostalgic, and abstract repertoires of left resistance with their new slogans, voicing dissent in joyful, conversational, informal, and witty styles, through wordplays, jokes, and pop-culture artifacts. Finally, I bring to light *Gezi*’s refusal to choose between two alternate modes of statist imaginary: one that would amplify the *AKP*’s increasingly conservative

and authoritarian rule; and another that would long for the return of the former Kemalist establishment, viewing the conservative constituencies of the *AKP* as its backward, dogmatic, and ignorant other.

When investigated in terms of their particularities as well as commonalities, these different fronts of dispute demonstrate two important aspects of *Gezi*: that and how the ‘youth’ emerged as the main agent creating and circulating a new language of resistance; and that and how ‘humor,’ unserious, incongruent, intellectually incompetent in appearance, emerged as the overarching modality of the language of the youth. Neither emergence is coincidental. Cast as outsiders to the realm of deliberation, rational discourse, political expertise, and social intellect, the youth are non-parts of the *police*. Denied reason and sense, they inhabited, at *Gezi*, the non-sensical, comical, and/or whimsical, cultivating their own, unfamiliar to non-youth, protest speech. Rather than assuming superiority (expertise, intelligence, high moral and intellectual status...), the *Gezi* protestors sought to reorganize relations between purportedly superior and inferior, by first and foremost *refusing* that separation. Their refusal to speak the language of the *police*, therefore, can be understood a counter-refusal—a “refusal of what has been refused” to them.<sup>398</sup>

Practicing such refusal, protestors asserted, *not* their capacity to speak, but their capacity to *not-speak*, or to not-speak in the languages on offer, thus enacting a politics that undergoes its own non-being and non-doing in order to renounce the distinction between subjects worthy and unworthy of politics. If, on Rancière’s account, politics come into being when subjects show that they *can* transgress their assigned roles, places, and qualities, what the politics of *Gezi* shows is that subjects *can* also *not* transgress the boundaries distinguishing sense from nonsense in order to put the validity of that binary into question beyond where they find themselves within the binary. Taking an additional step from a Rancièrian *transgression* of boundaries and reordering of

hierarchies, *Gezi* helps imagine the construction of a new political community, which, fluidifying the coordinates of sense, would abolish the hierarchies among forms of doing, being, speaking.

My analysis, therefore, suggests a new understanding of political reconfiguration—one that both disputes the prevalent ordering of knowledges and subjectivities in engaging public matters of the *police*, as per Rancière’s account, and also goes beyond that account by revealing the “limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing.”<sup>399</sup> *Gezi* protestors, I show in the rest of this chapter, exhibit ways to ‘do politics,’ ‘be political,’ and ‘speak politically’ by taking up repertoires that build on what is rendered non-sensical, what appears illegible and/or superficial. In its iconic formulation, “down with *some* things,” *Gezi* manifests, borrowing Halberstam’s vocabulary, “how to see unlike a state,” and more broadly unlike a *police*, with “more undisciplined knowledge, more questions, and fewer answers.”<sup>400</sup> Indefinite as it is, the slogan “down with,” as many others that I will discuss in this chapter, makes a definite commitment to open a site for questioning and critiquing, with fewer substitutions, and with a refusal of mastery, expertise, and, above all, grand narratives.

### **Rancière, *police*, politics**

Rancière approaches politics as a question of sensory experience, *aisthêsis*, that is essentially concerned with the division of the world and people into different “parts, places, functions and qualifications.”<sup>401</sup> Predicated on an assumption of inequality among its parts, the aesthetic division, or partition, constitutes the logic of governance which Rancière refers to as the *police*. By this specific coinage, Rancière invokes a ‘politics-as-usual’ underwritten by social hierarchies structuring everyday encounters.

*Police* orders, in Samuel Chambers’ words, “are nothing more nor less than the very social orders in which we all live,” as they organize our socialities by “distribut[ing] people and things

into locations and roles.”<sup>402</sup> Irreducible to law or the apparatuses of state, *police* signifies an institutionalized logic of inequality by which different social roles are associated with differential intellectual competencies and statuses.<sup>403</sup> This logic splits the world into sites of distinct sensory experiences, rendering certain groups visible and others invisible, and counting certain claims as intelligible and worthy of attention, while depriving others of such recognition.<sup>404</sup>

Rancière calls this operation the distribution of the sensible, presenting it as epiphenomenal to the conditions of inclusion in, and exclusion from, the *police*.<sup>405</sup> That is to say, behind the denial of equal rights to a social category—such as women, workers, or the poor—lies a presupposed deprivation in the persons occupying that category of the rational capacity to produce logical arguments, i.e. to have a share in the common *logos*.<sup>406</sup> Rancière draws on Aristotle’s account here, defining humans as a distinct species that possess *logos*, the capacity for reason and/or speech.<sup>407</sup> Capable of deliberative and thoughtful action, humans engage in political activities, making judgements and decisions that concern the public matters of the *police*. The excluded groups, deprived of a share in the common sensible world, *aisthêsis*, are the non-parts of this *police* order—the parts that have no part. Workers reduced to their manual labor and women assigned to the domestic sphere have been usual historical non-parts denied participation in deliberative and judicial offices.

Even in its most institutionalized and consolidated form, however, an inegalitarian order of society, a *police*, is only a contingent arrangement. It is open to disruptive contestation by another order—the order of equality, or of “politics.” Politics, in Rancière’s definition, is an act of disturbance against the *police*’s hierarchical arrangement. The “uncounted” of the *police*, Rancière writes, “make themselves count by showing up the process of division and breaking in on others’ equality and appropriating it for themselves.”<sup>408</sup> This is, above all, an intervention in the sensory

experience, insofar as politics is the making *seen* of what has been invisible and the making intelligible of what has been heard as noise.<sup>409</sup> When those who are denied a part in the common *aisthêsis*, hence not considered as worthy of attention or given equal status, dispute their statuses and roles, politics, in other words, breaks into the *police*.

The political question for Rancière is, therefore, inherently an aesthetic question. The miscount, oppression and disenfranchisement by and in the *police* are demonstrations of the ways in which the sensible world is compartmentalized with respect to “forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility.”<sup>410</sup> Politics, meanwhile, is the disruption of such a regime of identification through requalification of imperceptible groups as *subjects who are qualified to argue*—a process Rancière calls “political subjectivation.”<sup>411</sup>

Rancière theorizes political subjectivation by drawing on a variety of emancipatory struggles in history, where subordinate groups have disputed the inegalitarian orders in which they lived. These disputes, Rancière argues, were enactments of “politics”—a clash between the logic of *police* and an egalitarian logic—insofar as the acting groups refused their ascribed roles.<sup>412</sup> For instance, the plebians, dominated by the Roman patricians, were designated as beings of no account, deprived of *logos* and speech. Since their voice was preordained as noise, they had to make an axiomatic start, assuming their equality and their belonging to a common sensible world “where argument can be received and can have an impact.”<sup>413</sup> Roman plebians, Rancière shows, could bring about this common world by demonstrating that they, too, had an equal capacity for rational speech, in their exercise of the *same illocutionary forms* that the patricians had mastered.<sup>414</sup> For Rancière, uncounted parts of *police* orders dispute their domination by conducting themselves like their opponents, i.e. by appropriating their opponents’ words and replicating their activities.

Alongside the Roman plebian experience, Rancière also invokes the women's struggle for universal suffrage<sup>415</sup> and workers against their employers,<sup>416</sup> both of which were underwritten by a common aesthetic practice of *imitation*. Those perceived as invisible and mute, Rancière explains, expropriated the language of the dominant, in order to render themselves visible and intelligible, and to verify their equality.<sup>417</sup> Verification is an essential aspect of political disputes, because it puts together two worlds—the worlds of “inclusion” and “exclusion.”<sup>418</sup> Or, as Jason Frank puts it, verification, as a claim to a common world, is the act that conjures that world.<sup>419</sup> Spoken at once from outside and as a member of the political community, claimants thus anticipate their equal membership on Rancière's account.

Verification also implies that, without being perceived as such, the non-part cannot be an equal part of a social order. Requiring the superior's recognition to achieve equality, the uncounted speak the language of the dominant, so that their voices can be qualified as intelligible rather than as mere noise. Just like the Roman plebeians mimicking the speech acts of the patricians,<sup>420</sup> Jeanne Deroin, the French women's suffrage campaigner, appropriated the universal premises of the Declaration of the Rights of Men, despite the Declaration's exclusion of her sex “from any such universality.”<sup>421</sup> In a similar vein, in their struggles for the ‘right to work,’ 19<sup>th</sup> century French workers also took up “a position parallel to those of the discourse of the state” in order to make their demands heard.<sup>422</sup>

In short, deploying a “common language” with the dominant side of the hierarchical order—or, in Çiğdem Çıdam's words, “playing the others' game”<sup>423</sup>—verifies equality between a part and a non-part.<sup>424</sup> Playing the others' game, above all, “requires a break away from socially ascribed identity,” i.e. a disidentification with the places, practices, languages, and roles, through which a marginalized identity is constructed.<sup>425</sup> Such disidentification, in Rancière's account, is

the condition of a new identification with another world that is otherwise reserved for the privileged.<sup>426</sup>

Rancière's account of political dispute is a powerful example of ground-up theory built upon histories of emancipation. At the same time, it risks functioning as a gatekeeper in evaluating different forms of contestation against authority. These risks become evident in the commentaries Rancière has given on the 2005 *banlieue* uprisings in France. In these untranslated public commentaries, analyzed closely by Ayten Gündoğdu, Rancière views the uprisings as failed attempts to stage a political dispute, pointing to the protestors' resort to violence, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, to their speech acts, which he considers parochial and unimaginative.<sup>427</sup>

In his commentaries, Rancière cites, in particular, the *banlieue* protestors' chanting of the number "93" during the demonstrations. "93" is the official administrative number assigned to the department, Seine-Saint-Denis, the district where the most turmoil took place. From Rancière's point of view, this chant was a sign of the *banlieue* youth's unwillingness to *disidentify* themselves with those sites and symbols that held an inferior status in the republican imaginary.<sup>428</sup> Inferring from the chant that the protestors "reaffirmed their assigned identities instead of challenging them," Rancière concludes that, rather than enacting a "political" identity, they therefore ended up reproducing the pejorative "minimal identity" imposed on them by the *police* order instead.<sup>429</sup> Hence, for him, the protests fell short of a *political* event.

Gündoğdu disagrees with this conclusion. She argues that by uttering the administrative number "93," the protestors actually resignified their spatial identity, from one associated with "poverty and crime" to "an emblem of pride."<sup>430</sup> Though not "breaking away from the police distribution of identities and roles," the slogan "93," according to Gündoğdu, constituted a political



discourse insofar as it manifested a demand to redress everyday experiences of racial discrimination through equality and recognition.<sup>431</sup> Therefore, in Gündoğdu's view, the protests should be understood as an egalitarian dispute, contesting the French public perception which excludes *banlieues* from the Republic.<sup>432</sup>

Gündoğdu's disagreement is noteworthy, because it problematizes the sharp distinction Rancière draws between 'disidentification' and 'identification,' and his insistence on the former as a necessary condition of political subjectivation. Skillfully unpacking the systemic injustice operative at the peripheries of the French *police*, Gündoğdu argues that an expressive identification with the markers of marginality itself can be a way to move that particular identity away from the physical and figurative periphery of the republican *police* to its center. Protest activities, she claims, often oscillate between "military confrontation and logical demonstration, identification and disidentification, rebellious cries and dissensual speech."<sup>433</sup> Indexing politics only to the latter categories and dismissing the former ones as unintelligible risks reducing politics to a monolithic means of action and speech that may not be available, or appealing, to all dissident groups.

The kind of disidentification that Rancière demanded from the *banlieue* protestors was also missing at the *Gezi* Protests. Neither of these dissident groups sought to imitate the language of the *police* to make their claims heard or to enact the capacities they were alleged to lack. If the *banlieue* youth, with their ambiguous figures and hybrid practices, open up one reconsideration of Rancière's criteria for *political* disputes, as Gündoğdu suggests, then the *Gezi* youth provide another one through their use of humor, which, similar to the *banlieue* youth, lacked, in appearance, what, for Rancière, would count as political gravity. I turn next to the forms of speech crafted by the *Gezi* protestors to show how these forms trouble the separation of sense from non-sense, rational discourse from noise, and political disruption from parochial retreat.

### **Anti-governmental humor: avowedly unknowing resistance against an all-knowing leader**

“*Biz iyi biliriz*,” (translates as “we know very well”) is Erdoğan’s signature phrase.<sup>434</sup> Addressing his opponents, and the citizens of Turkey, more broadly, Erdoğan repeatedly adds the following phrase: “We do not need to learn X, Y, Z from you,” and “We are not going to ask your permission for X, Y, Z.” These statements epitomize and enhance the prevalent state-centrism that defines citizenship in Turkey, where citizens are “active in terms of [their] duties for the state, but passive with respect to [their] will to carry the language of rights against state power.”<sup>435</sup>

The barriers to active popular participation corollate with an exclusion from the community of *logos*, omitting the demands of various social groups from the order of the visible, including ethnic and religious minorities, women, and non-heterosexual/non-binary identified individuals. Under the decade-long *AKP* rule, the secularists, Kemalists, and a broadly construed ‘Westernized middle class’ have also been estranged by the new ruling bloc. The youth, however, is the marginalized category that cuts across all others, while being further patronized by Erdoğan’s paternal authority.

Frequently stressing that it is a governmental responsibility to ‘look after’ the youth, Erdoğan has been quite vocal about his intentions to regulate the lives of young people so as to ‘raise pious generations.’<sup>436</sup> This persistent aspiration is evident in his repeated demands that Turkish households have “at least three children,”<sup>437</sup> his frequent promises to abolish women’s right to abortion,<sup>438</sup> his discursive attacks on public displays of affection, and most concretely, his implementation of a ban on alcohol sales at night, expansion of patrols around bars and pubs,<sup>439</sup> and increase of the religious content in school curricula and the number of religious schools country-wide.<sup>440</sup> As Çağlar Keyder pointedly puts it, living “under the authoritarian guidance of a self-appointed father of the country,” the citizens of Turkey have a minimal say in matters

concerning broad sectors of life—leisure, reproductive, recreational.<sup>441</sup> For his part, Erdoğan maintains: ‘I am doing all this because I love my citizens [...] and it is my duty to protect them.’

Erdoğan mobilizes the same all-knowing leader-image when promoting his government’s neoliberal agenda. Despite their consequential effects on displacement, dispossession, and environmental destruction, a variety of contested economic decisions, in particular ones that foreground construction and real estate as a means of development, have been depoliticized in the name of economic growth and prosperity.<sup>442</sup> Promoting the idea that state officials could “transcend law for the ‘public good,’” the government has censored, surveilled, punished, and silenced opponents of such decisions.<sup>443</sup> Referring to these restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly pressures on the media, Nilüfer Göle describes pre-*Gezi* Turkey as a country, in which the “public sphere has been suffocating for some time.”<sup>444</sup> Using Rancière’s terms, the *AKP* government sought to shrink the public sphere “making it into its own *private* affair,” hedging the *police* from the interventions of politics.<sup>445</sup>

After “getting a scolding from the prime minister every day on TV,” dissidents, particularly the dissident yet unaffiliated youth, channeled their anger and frustration into street protests that became the *Gezi* Resistance.<sup>446</sup> At stake, from their point of view, was the *form of their everyday life*. According to an exploratory survey conducted by Esra Ercan Bilgiç and Zehra Kafkaslı, for 54 percent of the participants, *Gezi* was the first protest activity that they had engaged in their lives, while 85 percent of protestors rejected any affinity with a political ideology, party, or organization.<sup>447</sup> What took them to the streets was overwhelmingly (94 to 97 percent) the “erosion of liberties,” “Erdoğan’s authoritarian style of governance,” and “imposition of certain form of life.”<sup>448</sup> In the words of a protestor, “*Gezi* stood for the right to decide how many children [they] were going to have and to decide at what time [they] would stop drinking, in what kind of

environment [they] wanted to live.”<sup>449</sup> Where Erdoğan’s persistent scolding and self-authorized paternal interference fed tension and polarization, the reaction to it was of an opposite character—playful and festive.

The *AKP* government brought the long-standing statist tradition of criminalization and stigmatization of protest activities to a new level. As I discuss in Chapter 4, in his public commentary during *Gezi*, Erdoğan and the leadership of the *AKP* labeled the hundreds of thousands of resisters across Turkey, first, as ‘a few looters,’ and later as ‘terrorists’ and ‘ill-intentioned plotters.’ On the basis of this declaimed “incivility,” the government justified its recourse to coercion. Despite often violent attempts to repress popular mobilization, protestors maintained a joyful resistance before broader publics, who observed through alternative and social media. Whether clashing with the police, building barricades against *TOMAs*,<sup>450</sup> or occupying a public site, protestors chanted with joy and “love”: originally introduced by the LGBTQ groups, the dialogue-form slogan, “Where are you, *love*”—“Here I am, *love*,” became one of the most repeated chants of the protests.

The trope of expressed love was deliberate, posing a clear contrast to Erdoğan’s disparaging and hostile rhetoric. Equally salient was the vast use of unconventionally lightweight and apolitical forms of speech in slogans, banners, and graffiti. For instance, in the face of Erdoğan’s paternalism, protestors asked, “Do you want *three* kids like us?” Or, taking issue with Erdoğan’s commentaries on secular lifestyles, slogans announced: “We are incessantly kissing, Tayyip”; “You banned alcohol, people sobered up!” Many others imitated common sayings with reversed logics—“I *want* to bring kids into *this world*”—or with substitute meanings—“You shouldn’t have banned that last beer,” instead of “I shouldn’t have drunk that last beer.”

In the context of police violence against spreading protests, much graffiti addressed Turkish police directly, appropriating lines from dubbed Hollywood cop-movies: “This tear gas is awesome, dude,” and also, “These *people* are awesome, dude.” Some others gave advice: “Police, go sell simit [bagel], live in dignity” (Figure 6). Commercial messages were also appropriated, revised, and rewritten on shop windows. The graffiti on the shutters of a popular cosmetic store read, “Tear gas embellishes the skin’s beauty.” Messages about the “popular” character of the protests were often straightforward, casual, and effortless: “Dude, don’t be afraid, it’s us, *the people!*” and (in reference to the youth’s preoccupation with social media) “Away from keyboard, we are in the squares. We are not a marginal group, but an *original people!*” Photographed, disseminated through social media, and reproduced across the country, the graffiti displayed an incongruity with the ongoing conditions of violence—an incongruity that, as Mahiye Seçil Dağtaş points out, could be mobilized performatively: it marked a “denial of sanity when everything about the state becomes utterly insane.”<sup>451</sup>

Protestors had no need to deny that they loved video games, spent time on social media or watching football on TV: “You’re messing with a generation which beats up cops in GTA [the video game, Grand Theft Auto]”; “You may have tear gas, but we have an UEFA Champions Cup”; “Revolution won’t be televised, it will be tweeted.” Once the marker of civic dissociation, a symptom of the youth’s incapacity for public deliberation, popular culture became the medium for communicating popular discontent at *Gezi*. Long criticized for lacking interest in news and political events, young protestors projected that criticism back onto the mainstream media, which notoriously overlooked *Gezi*, arguably the largest wave of popular protest in recent history: “And then they ask, why we don’t read the papers!”

What makes the dominance of pop culture references worthy of attention is that it appears to amplify the common lore that associates youth with apoliticism and ignorance. The familiar narrative suggests that in the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état, which severely repressed and dismantled the vibrant revolutionary student movements of the previous two decades, the youth had become broadly pacified and depoliticized.<sup>452</sup> Younger people, in this narrative, were assumed to lack collective mindedness and social awareness—a deficiency that makes them, in Rancière's terms, outsiders to the common *aisthêsis*, a non-part in the *police* distribution of sensibilities.<sup>453</sup>

It is important to remember that the *Gezi* Protests took place at a time that the occupy movements in the West were facing criticisms for not being programmatic enough. As Christian Volk observes, protestors from a variety of social movements, such as Occupy, Anonymous, and Femen, were often labelled as “dreamers,” “extremists,” “incorrigibles,” whose concerns did not merit serious consideration.<sup>454</sup> Against the backdrop of both an already tenuous ground for protest movements, coupled with the longstanding bias against youth in Turkey, the protestors' voices were at risk of being dismissed as mere “noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt” instead of “speech, capable of enunciating what is just.”<sup>455</sup> In a context where the youth's belonging to the world of sense was an unresolved question, *Gezi* created a material world that often affirmatively refused sense. That refusal, often formed in comical modes and/or grounded in popular youth culture, operated on the principle of shaking the stability of given and expected understanding(s) of the world, opening a space for critique and rethinking with respect to everyday regimes of sense-making.

Illustrated by their protest speech in the examples offered above, *Gezi* protestors did not prioritize conducting themselves as reasoning beings sharing the same properties and capacities as those who “scolded,” denigrated, and dismissed them. Their speech acts, at times less concerned

with being funny than being unserious, seemed more likely to establish them as mischievous, diletante, or incompetent, rather than able and knowing in the way Rancière characterizes political disputers. However, such exemplary unserious humor attains a political meaning by way of its contestation of the meaning of democracy and democratic mandate. It attests to the protestors' awareness of Erdoğan's reduction of democratic mandate to a 'license' to be wholly unrestrained when carrying out what the people supposedly want. Despite Erdoğan's reasoning—"those who voted for us already authorized us to do these things"—protestors' public speech revealed that democratic politics involves more than a deference to the winners of the electoral game.<sup>456</sup>

While the government party, with its confidence at the polls, reduced the field of politics to voting, the dissidents' mobilization around issues of urban transformation, environment, family, body, sexuality, education, work, and recreation, was an invitation to fellow citizens, through witty objections and questions rather than definitive answers, to *think for themselves*. The protestors' objections, formed in and through humor, should be read as a *disagreement* over Erdoğan's monopolistic claim to knowledge and governance as well as with the content of those claims. As Lisy Seloni and Yusuf Sarfati put it, "humor provided the youth with a creative vocabulary," which they employed as "discursive power against the authorities."<sup>457</sup> In response to the prime minister's list of his title to govern single-handedly—knowing, caring, and elected—*Gezi* invoked the Rancièrian democratic principle: the ability of everyone to be in the business of government in the "absence of every title to govern."<sup>458</sup> The unaffiliated youth, with supposedly "no business being seen," became, in Rancière's sense, "visible," though not in the ways that his theory projects.<sup>459</sup>

*Gezi*'s deviation from Rancièrian politics exhibits neither a "failed attempt" at political subjectivation nor a mere empirical falsification of Rancière's theory. Instead, it tells a different

story of litigation against the *police* order—one in which dissenters against political authority derive their discourses from sources and sites that they *identify* with despite criticism and contempt. Once we attribute *political* quality to these discourses, against the grain of Rancière's definition, then we can also rework his dualisms, blurring the sharp distinctions between identification and disidentification, political speech and mere noise. Much like their counterparts in Paris' *banlieues*, the *Gezi* protestors "reaffirmed their assigned identities instead of challenging them." Revealing other ways of *being political* outside and beyond the mechanisms and styles that Rancière identifies,<sup>460</sup> their voices expand 'the political,' incorporating what may be, by familiar standards, illegible and unintelligible, if not pure noise.

**"No need to cite 'surplus value' to name a *wrong*"**

Interpreting the joy of the *Gezi* protestors, Cihan Tuğal writes, "Unlike the leftists and the soccer fans with their serious faces, they were smiling and almost dancing as they chanted. Despite the gas and the rubber bullets flying in the air, the mood was festive."<sup>461</sup> Tuğal is right to distinguish *Gezi* from the traditional political left, as the latter is predominantly organized around "a spirit of epic distance toward the present reality—[using] a language about dead revolutionary heroes and their deeds."<sup>462</sup> Entangled largely in nostalgia and martyrdom, and a dogmatic moralism in their approach to contemporary political questions, Turkey's left parties and organized movements have come to symbolize asceticism and detachment from the present. They have also been criticized for their hierarchical organizational structures, and implicit sexist and heteronormative biases, which have been pointed out by critical feminist, activists and scholars, as well as for their use of technical and abstract political language unfit to mobilize popular grievances.<sup>463</sup>

This is not to say that the traditional Left is a homogenous category. It includes different movement and party characteristics that are irreducible to one another. Nonetheless, what became



evident at *Gezi* was a widespread popular exhaustion with the Left political imaginary. Though the traditional Left was also part of the heterogeneous alliance at *Gezi*, other constituents of the alliance, for example, the unaffiliated youth, LGBTQ groups, and feminists, not only parted with the Left's repertoires of action and speech, but also mocked its intellectual insights and reasoning.

Youth, for instance, dramatized their presupposed lack of political consciousness through the jokes they played on the Left lexicon. In addition to "Down with some things," they also declared, "The New Democratic Youth: Chocolate is the only way," as a riff on the chant, "The only way is revolution" of the 1970s "Revolutionary Youth Organization." Another slogan, which appeared on walls across the entire country and stayed for a long time read "The solution is in Drogba." Not the leader of a leaderless movement, Drogba is a famous soccer player. The comical effect of the slogan comes partly from the fact that Drogba himself had nothing to do with the protests, and partly from the irony that, in Turkey, soccer stands for the third-way-out of left-and-right politics. It is the epitome of anti- and/or non-political entertainment.

Most influentially, the LGBTQ movement—marginalized by the state and deprived of popular recognition except for its limited visibility at annual Gay Pride parades<sup>464</sup>—produced a new memorable slogan by transforming, or rather queering, the old socialist chant, "Shoulder to shoulder, against fascism," into "Shoulder to leg, against fascism." Although "shoulder to leg" did not appeal to all sympathizers of *Gezi*—some found it vulgar, improper, distasteful and/or unserious—it nevertheless was popular among the protestors, who chanted the slogan during clashes with police. In time, one by one, conventional left slogans were replaced by queer cheers, which used styles of intimate conversation and interjections and exclamations coded feminine and/or queer. The new voices of joyful resistance proclaimed: "*Holy moly*, it's revolution!"; "Resist, *dear!*"; "*That way* of resistance"—'that way' connoting 'gay' in colloquial Turkish. As

Özge Yaka and Serhat Karakayalı put it, “it was *the act of subversion more than affirmation* that enabled the deviant, minor and heterodox subjectivity of the [Gezi] park.”<sup>465</sup> Indeed, during the two weeks that the *Taksim* Square and *Gezi* Park were both under occupation, the visual landscape of these localities, adjacent to each other, epitomized old and new forms of resistance at once. The square, on the one hand, was filled with groups of people holding banners and flags of parties/organizations and chanting grand ‘revolutionary’ slogans. This contrasted sharply with the park, which hosted people with all kinds of witty and singularly designed banners, singing, dancing, exercising, and debating, if not chanting their slogans, which captured their metaphorical and also physical state of flux and fluidity.<sup>466</sup>

Defying old repertoires of resistance, this new dissident speech can be better understood in relation to the collective psyche of the young people feeling that “they have been defined in terms of what they lack, particularly vis-a-vis previous generations.”<sup>467</sup> As Leyla Neyzi, citing Umut Azak’s ethnography, puts it, having difficulties to “come to terms with [their] generational identity,” the youth feel “oppressed by the discourse of the ’68 generation, who persisted in the nostalgia of their old revolutionary days marked by comradeship, solidarity and a belief in the future.”<sup>468</sup> Nostalgic attachment to the *old revolutionary days* configures the field of political experience, making politics the business of those descending from the revolutionary left legacy. Against this backdrop, the mocking tone of the *Gezi*-slogans appears as a refusal to speak through the vocabularies of a ‘superior’ Left discourse, insofar as mimicking the Left would have reinforced its claim to epistemic authority, preserving a discursive space apart from ordinary forms of expression and communication.

In his influential essay, “The Tragedy of the Turkish Left,” Ahmet Samim offers a critical account of various factions within Turkey’s Left (independent, Maoist, pro-Soviet, and so on) in

the wake of the 1980 military coup. Despite various divisions among left factions, Samim diagnoses a common characteristic—that “all sectors of the Turkish Left tended to alienate the masses in the name of the masses.”<sup>469</sup> Not too different than the social democratic strand, Left-Kemalism, which promoted “radical progressive policies imposed from above”<sup>470</sup> by a statist (*etatist*) elite, technocrats, and bureaucrats, the socialist left, too, approached “the masses” as a problem (of underdevelopment) to be solved rather than approaching the country from the viewpoint of the masses. Drawn to the mantra “for the people, despite the people,”<sup>471</sup> socialist organizations displayed, what some scholars call, the “elitist character of Kemalism [diffusing] the left arena of politics.”<sup>472</sup>

Even before the Left’s popular support attenuated throughout the 1990s and 2000s, each group, in their own way, had been drawn into endless discussions about the “*correct strategy* for seizing power” while, in their “fetishization of ‘immediate’ power and ‘total’ struggle,” they seemed to rapidly drift away from reality.<sup>473</sup> Social questions like access to health, medication, and transportation, organization of urban and village life, of work and education—the “problems of everyday life”—had been pushed aside. Instead, grand “theories” dominated most debates, detailing the “specificity” of each group in terms of “a few abstract formulae.”<sup>474</sup> Social concerns about rapid urbanization or the rise of ghettos, for example, found less publicity than parochial debates about “whether or not the ‘Theory of the Three Worlds’ is opportunist.”<sup>475</sup> Over the decades to follow, the chasm between the socialist left and ordinary people deepened as revolutionary language turned into a technical jargon, and splinter socialist groups became more preoccupied with closing ranks than speaking to broader audiences in relevant and legible terms.<sup>476</sup>

Problematizing this distant space, *Gezi* sought a return to simple and non-technical language, which can communicate everyday forms of injustice and oppression experienced under

a single-party government that had coupled neoliberal developmentalism with authoritarian techniques of control. *Gezi*'s new language of resistance attested to the protestors' desires to mediate popular frustrations differently, through words that were more closely connected to their on-the-ground experiences.

Although the notions of “capitalism, global powers, the finance world and neo-liberalism” have “fuzzy” meanings for most people, and thus do not make a convenient vocabulary for collective action, they do have *concrete correspondences* in everyday life.<sup>477</sup> Consider, for instance, sociologist Nilüfer Göle's acute observation: “In Turkey [...] capitalism has a name: the mall, or *AVM* (*Alışveriş Merkezi*). As an embodiment of commercial capitalism, consumer society and the global exploitation of labor, *AVMs* became part of the daily urban life.”<sup>478</sup>

*Gezi* replaced “fuzzy” meanings with concrete experiences. When, for example, government officials declared that a shopping mall complex would take over the space of *Gezi* Park—one of the only few remaining green sites in Istanbul—the decision translated to the city's residents as an “an act of plundering,” which prioritized business interests over ordinary people.<sup>479</sup> In the years preceding *Gezi*, the *AKP* administration upscaled the scope of its urban projects in Istanbul, announcing the planned construction of the Third Bosphorus Bridge and a third international airport (cutting through the city's northern forests by its connection roads), alongside a new artificial canal as an alternative to Bosphorus linking the Marmara Sea to the Black Sea, at the potential cost of the region's ecological balance and jeopardizing the city's drinking water supplies. In addition to these mega-projects, the government's (land) speculation-driven growth agenda also enforced, as part of the urban transformation, residential redevelopment of the city's peripheral and/or poorer neighborhoods, maximizing land rent while displacing the local populations.<sup>480</sup> Against the backdrop of this comprehensive urban transformation, which took

effect despite objections by city dwellers, the scientific community, and professional associations, *Gezi* provided a common platform, communicating popular discontent in messages as straightforward as “Hands-off my neighborhood, my square, my tree, my water, my soil, my house, my seed, my forest, my village, my city, my park!”

The two-week long occupation of *Gezi* Park, where the “Hands-off” placard hung from a tree, and the neighborhood forums—thirty-eight in Istanbul alone—that continued throughout the summer proved effective in generating public conversations around the right to healthy and equitable environments.<sup>481</sup> People gathered in these neighborhood forums to debate issues of importance to that *specific* neighborhood, while country-wide gatherings—about seventy forums across different cities—*together* connected discrete debates on an urban-rural continuum, invigorating spatial and environmental sensibilities at the national level. The language of the forum discussions, like that of the slogans, conveyed popular claims about urban belonging and ownership—enacting a “right to city”—through phrases borrowed from everyday life and wittily amended: “We are tenants of the building but own the neighborhood.”

In late summer 2013, Middle East Technical University (METU) students, using *Gezi*’s mobilizational strategies, started a tent encampment protest on campus against a major road construction project executed by the Metropolitan Municipality of Ankara, which would destroy part of the forestland on campus. The story was not much different from the *AKP*’s other grand projects (boulevards, hydropower plants, airports) that took effect despite local aggrovements. The METU students started their opposition campaign with the phrase, “Down with some roads!” The slogan was soon reproduced across the country.

The “road,” just like the “shopping mall, *AVM*,” is the form in which citizens of Turkey experience rampant neoliberalism, or what Lovering and Türkmen call, with reference to the

construction-monoculture, “bulldozer neoliberalism.”<sup>482</sup> “Down with some roads” has the capacity to disclose these contemporary forms of primitive accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation in a way that “fuzzy” sounding abstract and systems-oriented terminologies do not. While the traditional left has been overwhelmingly invested in these latter terminologies, the *Gezi* protestors, with their accessible, direct, and experiential articulations, were able to reframe the social agenda and elicit others to act, to voice, to resist. In the words of one protestor, “one does not need to cite ‘surplus value’ to name a *wrong*.”<sup>483</sup> *Gezi*’s move “away from *grand* narratives,” he further suggested, “created a space for the Left, and for politics.”<sup>484</sup>

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam, drawing on Stuart Hall, identifies a “low theory,” a form of theoretical model that, alongside its accessibility, “refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory.”<sup>485</sup> The *Gezi* protestors’ refusal of the language(s) of the *police* help imagine new forms of being and knowing that step out of conventional modes of engagement and “approved methods of knowing”<sup>486</sup>—forms that Halberstam locates within an archive of subjugated, disqualified, and *queer* knowledges. Indeed, *Gezi*’s humorous slogans, performing a certain “not knowing” with its ordinary ways of thinking and speaking, could “offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” than the ‘high theory’ of the Left canon.<sup>487</sup>

What is queer about *Gezi*’s repertoires is not only the queer love or sexual innuendo that the slogans sometimes invoked, but more profoundly, the refusal, evasion, and/or troubling of binary formulations—the binary of knowing and unknowing, mastery and incapacity, seriousness and frivolity, and legibility and illegibility—remember, “Down with *some* things!” Blurring the lines between these distinctions, the *Gezi*-humor rather collapses the binaries of the *police* towards

queer makings, in the form of unmaking and not knowing, which would reconfigure politics unbounded by the existing standards of ordering, qualification, valuation.

### **“Nobody’s soldiers”**

“We are the soldiers of Mustafa Keser” soon became another iconic slogan of the resistance. Keser, a down-to-earth folk singer, had no role in this designation. Instead, protestors produced the slogan as a riff on the popular secularist chant, “We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal,” known for its widespread use during the 2007 Republic Rallies, organized by the secularist opponents of the *AKP* government.<sup>488</sup> The original slogan was a product of Turkey’s long-standing secularist *vs.* Islamist split, representing the nostalgic Kemalist reactions against the *AKP*’s seizure of the state establishment. The pre-*AKP* era had been marked by military tutelage over civil political life, and the exclusion of Muslim identity from political and social life: the *police* outlawed Islamist parties and movements, banned public displays of religiosity, and discriminated against pious citizens applying for public office and services.<sup>489</sup> Reversing the *status quo*, Erdoğan’s *AKP* amplified secularist anxiety over what is often referred as an ‘Islamist take-over.’<sup>490</sup> Invested in such preconstructed binaries as modern *vs.* backward, educated *vs.* ignorant, enlightened *vs.* dogmatic, this secularist anxiety had formative effects on anti-governmental sensibilities during 2000s.

The new *Gezi* slogan was the first instance of a joke at the expense of the single most sacred figure in national/Kemalist political imagination, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—his last name literally translating as the “father of Turks”—to whom is attributed the national liberation and modernization undergone by the country in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idolized persona of Mustafa Kemal makes taboo any critique of foundational premises, top-down reformation, ethnonationalism, secularism, and statism. Kemalists retain Mustafa Kemal as a mythical “savior” of a romantic past, whose loss they mourn in ‘dark times.’<sup>491</sup>

Considering the God-like status of ‘the founding father,’ the new *Gezi* slogan’s mockery—“We are the soldiers of Mustafa Keser”—was quite provocative. Furthermore, given the *AKP*’s conservative-Islamist social policies and rhetoric, *Gezi* could have easily slid into an old-fashioned modernist opposition to the government; protestors could have adopted secularist narratives to resist Erdoğan’s authoritarian control over private and civil life. This kind of resistance, however, would have been blind to the “excessive statism and authoritarian tendencies that have dominated both Islamist *and* secularist politics in Turkey,” and could have participated in the marginalizing and polarizing discourses of the *police*.<sup>492</sup> Insofar as the former Kemalist campaigns against the *AKP* regime exemplified a longing for another *police*, the *Gezi* protestors’ expressed refusal of the Kemalist toolkit, albeit subtle, was a signal of their desire for a *political* interruption.

The discourse of the “Islamic threat,” like the Kemalist nostalgia for the old statist establishment, was a notable inspirational source for the young *Gezi* protestors. A couple of days after the protests spread to different cities, a new graffiti emerged and gained significant attention on social media: “No candy crush requests for days. *Are you aware of the danger?*” Taking the statement at face value, it would have been no surprise had the mobile game, Candy Crush, been indeed losing its popularity during the protests, as people were busy outdoors. Yet, the intriguing aspect of the slogan was its transfiguration of the (in)famous public alert, which had been formerly used in a series of public service announcements (PSA) by *Cumhuriyet*, a mainstream Kemalist newspaper, around the same time as the Republic Rallies. In one version of these PSAs, viewers could discern a woman’s face through the hole of a ballot box on a dark screen. The screen would then slowly freeze to display only the woman’s eyes, framed by the ballot box hole, creating the impression of a pair of eyes framed by a burqa. Ultimately, the phrase, “Are you aware of the danger,” would appear, written from right to left—Turkish language is written from left to right—



imitating Arabic to alarm the public about a perceived swerve towards Shariah (Islamic law), which was abolished by the revolutionary regime in 1924, a year after the declaration of the republic.

The subversion of the phrase's original reference—the threat of Islamization—through a seemingly apolitical and unserious gag might suggest, from one perspective, that the *Gezi* protestors were more in the business of having fun than engaging noteworthy political action. From another perspective, however, it demonstrates a break away from “pre-existing schemas of thought, matrixes of perception/sentiment” configurative of political experience.<sup>493</sup> While the original “soldiers of Mustafa Kemal” were present at the protests, to be sure, the comical attack on this identification distinguished *Gezi* from the previous wave of anti-government protests, separating the former's defense of democratic liberties and anti-*governmental* stance from the latter's secularist contempt towards the party's *constituencies*. As their graffiti made plain, the dissidents at *Gezi* were “nobody's soldiers.” Treating Kemalism as a constituent part of the *police*, *Gezi* protestors—in Onur Bakiner's words—were determined “not to repeat the moral and political failures of the secularists.”<sup>494</sup>

This determination, in contrast to its aimless appearance and mocking tone, demonstrates a politics of refusal: a refusal to choose between alternate modes of sovereign power claimed by two camps, the old and new establishment, each claiming to represent “the people” but, in actuality, the *police*. While the *AKP* under Erdoğan consolidates its electoral power by asserting that the party represents, and belongs to, the “common people,” the Kemalist objection against the *AKP*'s authority, until *Gezi*, was along the lines of an objection saying, ‘this government does not represent us.’ *Gezi*, to a large extent, circumvented this popular/populist competition by refusing

to participate in discussions of representation waged by the Kemalists, and by also refusing the image of an authentic ‘common people’ monopolized by the government.

### **Humor and politics: parting ways with Rancière**

Politics is (traditionally) a serious business. Yet, it is also often practiced in forms that are orthogonal to its “esteemed realm.”<sup>495</sup> There is notable suspicion about the diffusion of non-serious humor into the ostensibly serious political sphere, whether because it is not a proper tool,<sup>496</sup> or because it serves power rather than undoing it insofar as it displaces serious criticism<sup>497</sup> by promoting cynicism and apathy,<sup>498</sup> or because it is simply ineffective<sup>499</sup> and cannot “provide solutions to particular problems.”<sup>500</sup> At the same time, there have been attempts, especially recently, to understand the political work of humor.

Humor in/as politics has been discussed under different, yet related, categories, including comedy (as an aesthetic form, genre),<sup>501</sup> comic acts (acts that mobilize humor, cheerfulness, and laughter),<sup>502</sup> laughter (an activity often, but not always, induced by comedy, jokes, humor),<sup>503</sup> satire (mocking joke that is irreverent to power),<sup>504</sup> irony (playing with said and unsaid meanings),<sup>505</sup> joke-telling (folk humor in circulation),<sup>506</sup> cheerfulness (as an affective state; hilarity), parody (delighted dislocation and misrepresentation),<sup>507</sup> carnivalesque (parody and laughter inverting hierarchies).<sup>508</sup> Most of these forms were mobilized in crafting *Gezi*-humor. While these distinct elements, related to humor in one way or another, prompt different forms of thinking and operate through different affective registers, they do common political work by intervening in dominant systems of knowledge and meaning to recalibrate sensibilities and epistemologies. Thus, the conversation I forge between the humorous interventions of *Gezi* and Rancière’s aesthetic-politics—relying on the former’s multimodal constitution—applies across these varying genres of humor.

In the previous sections, I grouped *Gezi*-slogans in three categories in relation to the particular targets they take—the *AKP* regime, and its usual opponents, the old Left and Kemalism. These three categories, together, may be seen as a pluralized bloc in relation to which the *Gezi* protestors created a plural site of resistance, where belonging was not predicated on previous experience and expertise, or preordained by the dominant political matrix in Turkey. They reveal that the language of resistance was not bound by ‘what can be thought or said’ as set out by extant perspectives and encampments. Although the Left could provide vocabularies to articulate claims about justice, or Kemalist republicanism could help articulate rational discourses about secular lifestyle, the *Gezi* protestors turned down these habitual scripts. Declining to speak through familiar discourses, the protestors made *noise*, speaking in comical, superficial, unserious, and non-intellectual terms.<sup>509</sup>

Juxtaposing the “reasonable, serious, sober and rational” meanings of the “sensible”<sup>510</sup> with the “incongruous, ridiculous, ludicrous” character of humor,<sup>511</sup> Nicholas Holm offers a “comic analogue” of Rancière’s construction, namely the “distribution of the non-sensical.”<sup>512</sup> Holm’s inventive adaption helps interpret *Gezi*’s comic interventions, which contradicted the “prudent, sober, and wise” tone of existing arrangements, as manifestations of an “aesthetic of dissensus.” *Gezi*’s dissensual aesthetics, from this perspective, appears to expose and disturb “*intertwined* hierarchies of knowledge, seriousness and value.” Thus, both the forms in which *Gezi*’s speech acts are constructed—*unserious* and/or nonsensical—and the inspirational resources they evoke—*devalued* and despised—shore up their critical enterprise within and against existing frames of *knowledge*.

Refusing exiting frames of knowledge, sense, and politics, the non-serious humor of *Gezi* made it possible for younger generations, who were, as Keyder states, “unjustly accused of being

apolitical,” to feel included in the movement.<sup>513</sup> Diverging from the “baroque” styles of earlier periods, *Gezi* welcomed well-wishers of the protests—people who were not (yet) actively present in the streets, but were sympathetic to the mobilization.<sup>514</sup> In the words of one protestor, *Gezi* signaled that “anybody could join the protests—even if they were not soldiers or followers, or even if they did not have *complete thoughts* on all political questions.”<sup>515</sup> Oya Morya offers a similar account, arguing that the humor of the *Gezi*-slogans, by “mocking all ideologies as *complete thoughts*,” helped deactivate “rigid political ideologies” and “unify the protestors.”<sup>516</sup> The intertextual references to popular culture icons, social media, and everyday youth culture, to Morya, played an important role in “outreach” and mobilization, “targeting well-wishers from diverse groups.”<sup>517</sup>

The particular appeal of *Gezi*’s language to outsiders also recalls what Lindgren and Stoeckel call “for the lulz”— derived from the internet slang, lol: laugh out loud, coined by Anonymous in a statement connecting the collective desire for freedom with laughter.<sup>518</sup> Though not quite the opposite, the lulz differ from “moral or rational” discourses, which, according to Lindgren and Stoeckel, are “not enough for mobilising resistance.”<sup>519</sup> Social movements require aesthetic and affective strategies in order to inspire others “to desire, to hope; to act, [and] to move.”<sup>520</sup> The lulz, then, provide this necessary momentum, inciting joy and passion in resistance. *Gezi*’s shift from the wise-and-serious to the nonsensical and hilarious underwrites its power to incite action, imagination, and desire.

All these aesthetic and affective strategies point to a refusal of politics-as-usual, while complicating the ways in which ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ are understood and used. The ambiguous semantic map of the label “political” is not unique to *Gezi*, but a unifying thread across its contemporary movements. Consider for instance Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen’s

sketch of the 2011 occupy movements of Greece and Spain. For the Greek and Spanish protestors, the label “political” stood for “everything they [were] protesting against: hierarchy and distance between elites and ordinary people.”<sup>521</sup> Yet, at the same time, “being characterised as ‘political’ [was also] a way to be taken seriously by the existing political agents and by the media.”<sup>522</sup> As Prentoulis and Thomassen explain, Greek and Spanish protestors resolved this dilemma by rearticulating the meaning of political. Like their counterparts in Europe, *Gezi* protestors, too, problematized their representation as ‘apolitical’ by refusing their assigned passive and subservient roles and contesting their exclusion from decisions that concerned their everyday lives—in other words, by claiming their ‘political’ agency in the reconfigurative sense that Rancière uses the term.

If, however, the *Gezi* protestors’ refusal displaced the conventional meaning of the notion ‘political’ (that had been denied to them), it did not do so to take up Rancière’s idiosyncratic formula. Insofar as ‘the way to be taken seriously’ is, for Rancière, contingent upon the use of a qualified, hence qualifying, speech, there remains the question, ‘who is to decide what kinds of speech acts deserve attention.’ Even though qualified/qualifying language can be appropriated any time by whoever (as Roman plebians imitated the styles of patricians), this open contingency does not obviate the question I raise. How is the distinction between noise and speech arbitrated? Do the *Gezi* protestors fail to join the community of speech by remaining within the realm of noise? Analogous to the challenge Gündoğdu puts to Rancière—‘what dis/qualifies the chant, 93, as political’—*Gezi* calls for a reevaluation of the criteria Rancière sets for properly ‘political’ interruptions. What happens when dissidents refuse to play the other’s game?

Like the *banlieue* protestors, who reasserted their excluded parochial identity instead of incorporating themselves into the universal ideal of the *police*, the *Gezi* protestors used the symbols of their excluded and disdained identity rather than grounding their speech in authoritative

discourses. Does being improper and unfit make the language of *Gezi* unpolitical? Or, as Prentoulis and Thomassen key in on that problematic, can political theory/theorists “test whether the actions and claims of the protestors correspond to this or that theoretical perspective”?<sup>523</sup> If the answer is no, which I believe is the case, then the question becomes, what can political theory learn from the practices of the protestors?

One answer to this question is that the boundary problem Rancière lays out—the separation of the ‘knowing’ from the ‘unknowing’—turns out to be not so much, or not necessarily, a question of *transgression* through which “putatively disabled” subjects demonstrate their actually “abled nature,”<sup>524</sup> but a question of *dissolution* or deactivation of those boundaries. If we interpret the *Gezi* protestors’ whimsical speeches as a refusal of the boundaries that distinguish sense from nonsense, speech from noise, then their acts become not only a critique of their own positions in the hierarchy of worthiness, but a critique of the conditions of the hierarchy itself. While acts of transgression move subjects across lines, the non-transgressions of the *Gezi* protestors put the lines of division themselves in question. By refusing to inhabit the acceptable structures of knowing, and taking a detour through the apolitical, nonsensical, and comical, these non-transgressive acts, in their very performance, contain a radically reconfigurative meaning—that they *corrode*, rather than contest or litigate, the distinction between those who are qualified to participate in politics and those who are not. And, they do so by problematizing not the assignment of people to places and roles, but the assignment of politics to certain logics of being, knowing, speaking, and acting. Politics, in this sense, beyond a Rancièrian litigation against a *police* order by a non-part, appears “as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment in normativity” of *logos*, of language, style, or performance.<sup>525</sup> It becomes a space, where non-parts, abandoned by rule and order, lay claim to—rather than disassociate with—what is under, below, beneath the culture of the *police*.

To put it differently, the capacity, or potentiality, of protestors to speak as the other and/or the superior includes both a capacity to speak, as well as a capacity to not-speak. As Aristotle puts in *Metaphysics* Book 9, “all potentiality is *impotentiality* of the same [potentiality] and with respect to the same [potentiality].”<sup>526</sup> Lucidly articulating Aristotle’s ontology of power (as potentiality/capacity, *dunamis*), Jill Frank argues, “*dunamis* is not.”<sup>527</sup> It is a “non-being,” insofar as it embodies the “not-(yet)-being and not-(anymore)-being of actualization.”<sup>528</sup> Giorgio Agamben, too, brings to view the co-constitution of im/potentiality, arguing that “the possibility of privation” (*adynamia*) is always in relation to its own possibility, as forms of being and doing always undergo their own non-being and non-doing.<sup>529</sup> This understanding of potentiality leads Agamben to perceive “sensation” in relation to “anesthesia,” “knowledge” in relation to “ignorance.”<sup>530</sup>

By including being “capable of [one’s own] impotentiality,”<sup>531</sup> Aristotle’s definition of capacity helps revise Rancière’s aesthetic regime of knowledge and politics. The distribution of the sensible, as contingent on the assertion, and actualization, of a capacity of “opposing reason with reason,”<sup>532</sup> should not be thought independently from the actualization of a potentiality to *not-be* rational, to *not-speak* in ways that demonstrate intellectual insight and competence, insofar as such “[*potentiality to not-be*] preserves itself as such in actuality.”<sup>533</sup> In this sense, the “not” of being/doing, in every instance, opens to new possibilities.<sup>534</sup> The capacity to not-speak the language of the *police* is a path to speak otherwise, which brings into being something “potentially new.”<sup>535</sup>

Second, *Gezi*-humor, by reframing social concerns “not according to what was deemed legitimate in the dominant socio-cultural reality” but according to the “alternative setting presented by the activist joke makers,” sought to unsettle the dominance of established schemes of

identification.<sup>536</sup> Humor was especially efficient as a tool to unsettle established identities because of its capacity to estrange an audience from habitual forms of socialization. By defamiliarizing its audience with what was common sense—the community of *logos*—*Gezi*-humor generated a “*dissensus communis*,” parting ways with the *status quo*, and also a “*sensus communis*,” a community of those who participate in jokes.<sup>537</sup> In *The Undercommons*, Harney and Moten describe the being-together of the dispossessed as “to be among the ones, who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything.”<sup>538</sup> In having no part, and also no sense, the *Gezi* youth occupied the non-sense—their created and creative *sensus communis*.

Deployed in provocation, irony, and ridicule, *Gezi*’s humorous slogans were purposed, on one hand, to “undermine the stable codes and rules” and dismantle the judgmental hierarchies of the *police* order,<sup>539</sup> and on the other hand, to attract attention, disseminate, and vitalize mobilizational energies across the population. The attention grabbing, curiosity-arousing new dissident language, shared and circulated, not only facilitated the expansion of political mobilization, but also changed the ways in which politics and participation were understood. Loosening the hold of polarized and polarizing legacies, dissident language opened a new space for politics, where the silenced were encouraged and empowered to speak.

It is important to remember that the very symbols, sites, and identities associated with the absence of political literacy or sensibility were the ones that were creatively taken up for political dispute at *Gezi*. Young participants in the mobilization, without denouncing their parochial and disdained attachments, turned those attachments into a resource that shored up political agency. This conclusion does not undermine the other strategies Rancière highlights, such as using the *police*’s universal language, imitating their power, and playing the others’ game, but it argues for diversifying the spectrum of political subjectivation. Political subjectivation, as we see at *Gezi*,



includes, not necessarily, or not always, a disidentification with an excluded identity, but all kinds of identifications accompanied by creative repurposing, and revalorization.

## Conclusion

*Gezi*'s aesthetic, produced predominantly by youth, fueled public interest in the ongoing protests within and beyond national borders. It also opened a space for new and unbounded imaginations outside the limits of the thinkable and practicable which had been predetermined by a set of “-isms” from Kemalism to socialism. Using comical assertions to disturb entrenched political positions and sensibilities, *Gezi* protestors extended the target of their resistance from Erdoğan's government to the broader political field with its epistemic hierarchies and multicentric authorities.

If, then, on one level, *Gezi* was a popular reaction against Erdoğan's authoritarian-paternal approach to public matters, on another level, it was an expression of a shared fatigue with existing political discourses. While the reaction against Erdoğan generated the protestors' demand *to have a say* in politics, the fatigue with existing political discourses prompted them to seek a change in the *ways of saying*. Both challenged the distinction between “those who know and those who do not”—those who have a share in the common intellect and those who do not—a distinction that defines the contours of political participation according to Rancière.<sup>540</sup>

Departing from a strictly Rancièrian sense of politics, *Gezi*'s abundance of unserious content that sometimes bordered on ineptitude signaled *incapacity* for rational speech and deliberation, a refusal to reiterate. Furthermore, the *Gezi* protestors' appropriations were not from their opponents or from the ‘universal language’ of the *police*, but from their own material-cultural world, despite the low esteem in which that world was held by their opponents and supporters alike. Examining its unique forms of expression, I have explored in *Gezi* a form of political

disruption that changes the meaning and value assigned to excluded groups, as these groups appropriate the cultural products of the sites they habituate.

The *Gezi* protestors' refusal of the *lingua franca* of the *police* is best captured by what Harney and Moten calls, an "interplay of the refusal of what has been refused."<sup>541</sup> Their humorous subversions of the *police* language—the language of the community of *logos* that they were denied—present not (or, not only) an opposition to their positions in the *police* hierarchies, but an "appositionality"<sup>542</sup> that "calls such positions radically into question."<sup>543</sup> Not a demand for recognition, this new language attests to a desire to dismantle and dissolve existing structures of exclusion. This is a desire that comes into being not in the form of grand narratives or theories, but in witty and playful forms, like humor. To the *Gezi* protestors there was—in the words of Kennan Ferguson—"a connection between the humorlessness of officialdom, tyranny, and authoritarianism."<sup>544</sup> The following chapter turns to another example of playful resistance, articulating as well "play" as a mode of political action appositional to the managerial logics of the *police* as well as police.



**Figure 6: “Police, go sell *simit*, live in dignity.”**

## Chapter 4: Breaking billboards: protest and a politics of play

### Introduction

The *Gezi* Protests, to this day, are remembered as a revolt of the “*çapulcu*,” which translates roughly to “marauders” or “looters.” When it became clear that the collective outrage of the last days of May 2013 was not likely to abate, the Turkish government accelerated its defamatory efforts, condemning the protesting groups as “marginal” and “ill-intentioned.”<sup>545</sup> Relying on a framework of “civility,” Prime Minister Erdoğan, in particular, dismissed the protestors as unworthy of political engagement while simultaneously criminalizing them as dangerous and destructive—in his words, “a few *çapulcu*.” Erdoğan’s attempt to repress and disempower the protestors by way of such language backfired, as protestors rapidly reappropriated and resignified the term to their own advantage. Through production of a number of neologisms in Turkish and anglicized hybrid Turkish, as in “chapulling,” the once derogatory term became a synonym for “fighting for your rights.” Such subversive reappropriations notwithstanding, Erdoğan sustained his consistent use of the term, charging *Gezi* protestors broadly with incivility.

Erdoğan’s recourse to “civility” is far from unusual. Traveling across global sites of contentious politics to dismiss popular uprisings, “incivility” is a common and broad trope: it is sometimes contrasted with deliberative modes of political engagement, as, for example, when the “uncivil” act of “shouting down” a speaker is cast as a threat to free speech, pluralism, and tolerance;<sup>546</sup> at other times, it is equated with “vandalism,” and includes a wide range of acts, from occupations and blockades, to clashes with police that damage property or obstruct traffic or the flow of goods or services.<sup>547</sup> Setting standards for ‘appropriate’ democratic politics—peaceful, conscientious, limited, and respectful—the civility discourse, in principle and practice, casts a wide range of acts which fail to meet these criteria as illegitimate, if not illegal and criminal.

Targeted are worldwide protest movements, from the U.S. to Hong Kong, Chile to Turkey, as dissident activities are portrayed as deviant and dangerous, lacking the proper spirit to appeal to values and interests held in common by a greater majority.<sup>548</sup>

For example, in a compelling 2016 essay, Juliet Hooker takes up common critiques of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, which charge the movement with a “failure to emulate the political exemplarity of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.”<sup>549</sup> These critiques, as Hooker in conversation with Brandon Terry points out, take their departure from a romantic depiction of the Civil Rights Era, disavowing both the more radical aspects of the Civil Rights Movement and significant disagreement observed among Black activists at the time.<sup>550</sup> Such sanitized historiography, in turn, functions as a way to delegitimize present day racial justice struggles, leaving “very little room for blacks to express outrage at injustice.”<sup>551</sup> Four years after Hooker’s meditations on BLM protests from Ferguson to Baltimore, the terms of the debate during the Summer 2020 protests—after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police—were unchanged: “Where some saw unlawful ‘riots,’ others participated in justified ‘uprisings.’”<sup>552</sup>

Unlike retrospective appropriations of the Civil Rights Movement during contemporary American anti-police struggles, in the case of Turkey and *Gezi* state authorities manufactured from scratch a contradistinctive image of peaceful and civil action to forestall the spread of the protests: the mythologized image of the “first three days of the protests.” These very early days of the mobilization, to which I will return shortly, were presented, *ex post facto*, as the reasonable and conscientious phase of the mobilization; omitted was the violence caused by disproportionate police repression against protestors. With state violence disavowed, and themselves accused of engaging in vandalism and destruction, the *Gezi* protestors faced a binary choice around a politics

of in/civility: they could either pursue their cause through civil and peaceful means or they had to justify their resort to incivility and violence.

This all-too-common in/civility binary, operative at *Gezi* and elsewhere, is sustained by normative and instrumental logics that judge the legitimacy and expediency of the *means* of protest. From a normative perspective, radical protest activities are often constrained by reference to public order and safety. On pragmatic grounds, such activities are criticized for undermining otherwise worthwhile political objectives.<sup>553</sup> Together these normative and instrumental approaches deem violence and incivility both morally wrong and strategically counterproductive. With almost every emergent dissident mobilization, this global kind of common sense is mobilized, criticizing protestors for failing to adopt peaceful, conscientious, and limited tactics. In Turkey, the prolonged occupation of *Gezi* Park / Taksim Square and the street demonstrations across the country elicited both normative and pragmatic reactions. Acting on behalf of the state and in the name of “public security,” Turkish police used force to clear the protestors, as ongoing street clashes stirred concerns, among protestors and sympathetic onlookers alike, that the “incivility” and “violence” of the protests would jeopardize the political objectives of the movement and its legitimacy.

### **The problem with the politics of in/civility**

The topic of ‘uncivil resistance’ raises two sets of questions: one political; and the other political theoretical. The political question concerns the assignment of such labels as “violent,” “uncivil,” “vandal,” “criminal,” “militant,” which, as Bernard Harcourt argues, is “intimately connected to power” and reflective of a “certain position of privilege.”<sup>554</sup> Governments making accusations of incivility often seek to manage public perception by repudiating disruptive demands of discontented and alienated protestors. In Linda Zerilli’s words, discourses of civility operate as a

way of “masking and managing disruptive demands,” thereby restricting political debate to questions of manners and means rather than opening it up to popular grievances, aspirations, and imaginations.<sup>555</sup> Accordingly, the debate around “naming and identifying, the use and avoidance, the criticism and defense” of incivility gives the upper hand to those who can set the coordinates of public debates.<sup>556</sup> Once protestors are tagged as “uncivil,” “militant,” “violent,” it becomes possible to treat their activities and expressions as something other than political dissent. Acts of throwing a stone, a shoe, or a flaming tear gas cannister become subject to instrumental and moralizing judgments that, in Zerilli’s word, “mask” their collective claims about injustice and oppression. With their dissenting activities de-politicized and criminalized, oppressed and discontented groups remain vulnerable to the state’s aggressive interventions, trapped in what Elizabeth Hinton calls a “cycle” of “over-policing and rebellion.”<sup>557</sup>

The politics of in/civility open up a political theoretical problem-space as well: the configuration of ‘means and ends.’ When idealized images of civil, peaceful, and orderly public exchange govern political practices on the ground, political actors are either rejected outright for their use of impermissible means or they are requested to justify their activities by reference to ultimate guiding ends. In both cases, the criteria applied to their activities are disconnected from the experiences of protest. Both the normativity that imposes abstract ideals on a concrete action and the normativity that defers action’s meaning to future ideals are at odds with the nature of political action, which, as Alexander Livingston has pointed out, is an “open and uncertain process of public experimentation.”<sup>558</sup> Judgments that approach political action from the perspective of moral ideals or, alternatively, as merely strategic tactics justifying non-ideal means like coercion by prioritizing ends over actions, miss the “vagaries of experience” which political actors, like the *Gezi* protestors, creatively navigate.<sup>559</sup> Failing to attend to the protestors’ “present form of

togetherness,”<sup>560</sup> criticisms and justifications of uncivil resistance alike undermine what Hannah Arendt once identified as *the* “field of experience” of politics—“action.”<sup>561</sup> In doing so, they risk eroding the ‘politics’ in collective action.

These political and political theoretical problems with the trope of in/civility do not suggest that civil and/or non- or anti-violent action lacks political capacity. Civil disobedience, although not in its paradigmatic liberal representations, can be attentive to the structural violence of the *status quo*, as well as to the ambivalent relationships, tensions, and negotiations that reside within the spectrum of direct political action. Civility, in this sense, can be theorized and exercised as a “democratic practice of contestation”<sup>562</sup> and/or as a power to transform a “revolutionary moment from within” by resisting the generalization of violence.<sup>563</sup> In framing my argument in terms of the in/civility debates, my aim is not to decide what kinds of means are more compatible with political protest, nor to make a claim about how protestors ought to act. Instead, I am concerned with the ways in which the oppositional pairings of “civil-uncivil” and/or “peaceful-violent” constrain the political agency and power of protestors, and too quickly dismiss a variety of protest activities as illegitimate and/or ineffective.<sup>564</sup>

Treating these state-imposed pairings as a tool for consuming the mobilizational momentum of the protestors and refusing the means-ends binary, in this chapter I draw attention to an alternative response from *Gezi*. During some of the most severe clashes with police, a group of protestors from Ankara recorded a video performance, “If only I would break you just for this” (hereafter, “Breaking Billboards”), addressing the question of “whether protestors were employing appropriate means for their political objectives.”<sup>565</sup> Released at a moment when the apparent contrast between civility (demanded of the protestors by the state) and incivility (defended or justified by the protestors) demarcated the contours of public deliberation, the video clip, I argue,



exhibits a new mode of activity that circumvents the state's dichotomous framework by refusing to operate on the terms it imposes.

The theme of the clip is “broken billboards,” one of the symbols of material damage for which the “uncivil” protestors were responsible. The video features protestors giving reasons for destroying billboards that riff on a widely-known verse from Turkish poetry. In a puzzling twist, the protestors do not frame their destructive activity by listing motives and intentions that might be typical in the context of an insurgency. Instead, they offer non-purposive, metaphorical, poetic, and also often ludicrous, unsound, or incongruous reasons. Refusing to defend what they have done by reference to the ends of their protests—thus renouncing instrumental and normative criteria for action—the protestors in “Breaking Billboards,” I argue, unsettle the judgements about the legitimacy and efficiency of means with respect to the ends of protest.

To elaborate the alternative mode of political action I take the video performance to illuminate, I turn to Giorgio Agamben on “play,” which refers to the capacity to disrupt conventional configurations of means and ends by liberating objects and activities from the conventional purposes they serve and opening them to new uses and praxes.<sup>566</sup> Criticizing political approaches to the question of means and ends across his major works, Agamben refuses what he calls “the false alternative between ends and means.”<sup>567</sup> The problem, for him, is that political theories either isolate ends from, and prioritize them over, means, or they evaluate means only with respect to the ends to which they are directed. Beyond the primacy of ends or means toward ends, Agamben argues for a “pure mediality”—means detached from ends—and constructs a political theory of destituent resistance, or inoperativity, around the notion of medial action.<sup>568</sup>

A prime example of a purely medial action for Agamben is “pure violence,” a form of human action that can resist instrumental appropriation by a state, or any constituted order

following the constituent moment.<sup>569</sup> Agamben derives his idiosyncratic interpretation of “pure violence” from a close reading of Walter Benjamin, diverging from the notion’s generally mixed and, at times, misleading reception.<sup>570</sup> Pure violence, in Agamben’s specific use, signifies seeking a change in approaching the use of violence and, more broadly, the use of means in politics, thinking beyond the statist discourses of legitimation. It displays the potential of opening a space for free human action that does not participate in establishing a sovereign order. Agamben associates this space with play, where means, though purposive, are not evaluated by their relation to extrinsic ends. Offering neither a ‘critique’ nor a ‘defense’ of the use of violence as a means to a certain end, pure violence, rather, *plays* with statist discourses that rely on the instrumental relationality between means and ends in political action.<sup>571</sup>

Using the conceptual nexus of “play,” “mediality,” and “pure violence,” this chapter presents an alternative to those “false alternatives” between means and ends, and civility and incivility. In what follows, I first sketch *Gezi*’s evolution in relation to these binary framings. Next, I present the video clip as an alternative position that refuses the binaries and thus bypasses the state’s managerial control. I do so by first contextualizing the clip in relation to the original verse it takes as its model, where I show how the use of poetry, both in form and content, enables the protestors to give a poetic and playful account of their activity. Second, I elaborate the politics of their poetic play through a close reading of Agamben on Benjamin, demonstrating that and how Agamben’s theorization of *play* as a reconfigurative interruption of the means-ends relation transforms the framing, classification, and evaluation of political protests.

### **The myth of the “first three days”**

As we saw in previous chapters, despite severe repression by the government, the *Gezi* demonstrations attracted large numbers of participants across Turkey, and lasted, in varying

intensities, through the summer. As the scale of the movement grew from a local sit-in to a full-scale popular revolt, the expanding repertoire of protest activities began to disrupt broad swathes of urban life. Collectively and spontaneously, protestors built thousands of barricades by using burnt-out public busses, paving stones, billboards, fences, and other materials they found in the streets. It took only minutes for protestors to decide whether to start up a new barricade and how to build it.<sup>572</sup> Barricade zones resembled trenches as tear gas canisters were hurled back to police, and protestors were supported by drums, whistles, pots and pans. Public spaces and things were also appropriated to new uses: busses, bus stops, ATMs, and billboards became protest-art installations.

The government soon distinguished two stages of *Gezi's* evolution: the 'first three days' were described as the peaceful and reasonable and, thus, legitimate phase of the protests; by contrast, the next phase was characterized as provocative and violent, and as led by marginal groups. The classification of the mobilization into two phases gained currency in some quarters, with many people offering a version of: 'I, too, supported the movement during the first three days' ... 'but, not after it took a *violent* turn.' Despite the fact that many of those opposed to the government did not quite buy into its claims about the 'violent turn,' that language was sufficiently compelling to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the uprising.<sup>573</sup>

The dual framing was so pervasive and persuasive that the dissidents themselves began to justify their resistance by taking up its terms. For example, in response to criticisms of the violent and destructive elements of the protests, many sought to legitimize their "uncivil" behavior as reflexive self-defense by citing disproportionate state violence. Some stressed that their "'marginality' itself [was] produced by state violence, and not vice versa," insofar as the allegedly marginal, violent, and uncivil insurgents had been the targets of militant or aggressive politics,

estranged by the criminal justice system, or living in gray zones where state-ordered violence was an ever-present possibility.<sup>574</sup> From this perspective, dissident incivility is a symptom of a distorted social life and shrinking space for civic participation and, above all, an after-effect of systemic violence by the state.<sup>575</sup>

These important and nuanced analyses of violence demonstrate the complexity of the political space in question. At the same time, even a careful ‘defense of uncivil resistance’ as justifiable transgression allows the statist frame to shape the content and contours of public deliberation. Dichotomous representations of political action—reduced to modes of civility *versus* incivility—obliterate the plurality of strategies and imaginations that constituted the protests. They thus attenuate and depotentiate mobilizational energies on the ground. Refusing the confinement of the political sphere to debates over good and bad forms of protest, some of the protestors generated an alternative response, one which sought to recover precisely the multiplicity of meanings and outlooks that the statist frame sought to efface.

### **“If only I would break you just for this...”**

During the most severe clashes at the barricades, a group of protestors filmed a video clip, titled, “If only I would break you just for this.” This was an echo of a verse originally written by the poet Cemal Süreya: “If only I would have loved you just for this.” The video clip shows individual performers, one after the other, telling in one sentence why or how they broke the billboard they stand beside. Instead of disavowing the violence of their activity, or justifying it by reference to a just cause and/or as a reasonable necessity in a context of state violence—indeed, it remains unclear whether the performers have actually broken the billboards they say they did—protestors offer metaphorical, surreal (or, rather, magical realist) and often ludicrous explanations. Breaking away from the conventional continuum of objectives, intentions, and actions, and reconstruing

protest activity in plural terms, the clip corrodes the conceptual significance of purposiveness, manifesting itself, as we will see, as an Agambenian “means without end.”<sup>576</sup>

The video clip was released on *Youtube* on June 18, 2013 by, in their own words, “the resisting students of Ankara, with the help of provocateurs and marginal groups, sponsored by foreign powers.” Although filmed and posted by students, the clip includes performing protestors from different age groups. It begins with the line “if only I would break you just for this...” on a blank black background, and proceeds with a series of independent scenes of a different damaged billboard with a protestor standing at its side. In each scene, a protestor presents why s/he broke the billboard. The first speaker says, “I broke this billboard, because I wanted to make a sound.” Next comes an interlude in which we see an anti-riot water cannon vehicle and a group of police officers shooting rubber bullets. They are making quite a bit of sound. Each speaker—there are thirty—offers a different “explanation” for breaking a billboard. Between the speakers are scenes of police attacks recorded on non-professional devices. For instance, following a speaker who states that she broke the billboard “because [she] was bored,” we see a video recording of two police officers throwing tear gas canisters as if out of boredom, while country music plays in the background. The protestors return the canister to the policemen, who struggle and fail to deactivate it. The scene becomes a comedy of ineptitude before the video continues with more speakers giving their “reasons” for destroying billboards.

The clip blends predictable, purposive, and practical reasons with poetically imaginative metaphorical meditations. Some protestors give instrumental accounts of why they broke a billboard: “because [they] needed stuff for the barricade”; or “because the police have their helmets and weapons, but protestors have nothing.” Far more portray their actions in absurdist terms: “I broke this billboard, because I want to see life from a new point of view”; “... because I am worth

it”; “because the shattered glass is beautiful”; or “because, now the birds can pass through it.” It might seem, at first, as if the narratives seek to explain and justify the destructive activity by appealing to practical rationality to underscore a necessity, or by recurring to humorous symbolism so as to sound unserious or enigmatic. However, the spectrum of causality is hardly exhausted by such a bipolar continuum. Instead, the protestors’ narratives imply that there are infinitely many modes of relationality between acts, motives, and ends.

For instance, a couple of protestors mention purposes that cannot be heard intentionally: “I broke this billboard because I wanted the tear gas canister to shoot me in the eye”; or “...because I didn’t want it to cast a shadow on the police.” Others offer entirely apurposive reasons, such as “aesthetic concerns” or “to play dodge ball,” while still others give explanations that are unconnected to any conceivable use of the billboard, either in its intact form in peace or in its damaged state during the insurgency. For example, one person claims that she intends to recycle the shattered glass, and another says she is planning to put the billboard’s frame on fire in order to jump through it—as at a spring welcoming feast.

Why do the protestors offer such puzzling accounts of what they are doing? A rather straightforward defense of the insurrectional disturbance could have asked for understanding and sympathy from its viewers by maintaining that ‘I broke this billboard, because I had to defend myself,’ ‘because I have been exposed to state violence on a regular basis’ or ‘because the damage I caused here is small compared to the human cost incurred by the state.’ These perspectives are not completely absent from the clip. Some speakers do give such accounts of their action: referring to police brutality, one states firmly that “breaking billboards is a much more innocent act than breaking heads.” Moreover, in the video clip’s appended footage, audiences are reminded that reports about “the number of billboards that are broken” (which, according to the creators of the

clip, is “yet to be certain”) are profoundly disturbing, as the number of people who are seriously wounded or have passed away continues to escalate. These statements, however, appear only at the very end of the clip or are presented in humor. With twenty-five out of thirty speakers offering absurd and theatrical accounts rather than legibly reasonable arguments, it is by far the former that dominate the clip.

How might we read the clip? The title of the video clip is immediately legible to Turkish-speaking audiences as a riff on Cemal Süreya’s original verse, “if only I would have loved you just for this,” probably one of the most widely-known lines of poetry in Turkish literature. This literary evocation was one among many borrowings from Second New Wave poetry often used as slogans or written as graffiti during *Gezi*.<sup>577</sup> The mimetic relationship between clip and verse is no mere ornament. On the contrary, as I show next, the clip becomes more fully legible only when read alongside the original verse’s semantic web.

The verse—“If only I would have loved you just for this”—is the last line of each of the twenty poems in Süreya’s book, *Güz Bitiği* (1988), which he refers to as itself one long poem. In each of the twenty poems, the line preceding the final one often revives either a memory or a trait of the beloved, as follows:

“We’ve ordered two cups of tea there, one lighter,  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

“Your voice deepens in your good moments  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

“There is a second glitter in your eye  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

Although the twenty poems taken together suggest that the poet *did* love a particular person, and that he *loved for the reasons he mentions*, the last line of each poem is enigmatically constructed with an “if only – would have” clause. When interpreted as a collection, these twenty poems reveal

that while each and every “*just for this*” reason could alone be a sufficient ground for love, because there exists not one but many grounds, none establishes love just by itself.

What is more, the first of each of the last two lines, where the reason for love supposedly resides, does not, in every poem, recall a personal trait or a shared moment of affection. Instead, some verses refer merely to certain anecdotes or reflections that appear unrelated to the experience of loving:

“Birds have gathered to migrate  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

“Plenty of people sitting at their doorsills  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

“I have nothing else other than the elapsing street  
If only I would have loved you just for this”

The mismatch between the causal claim of the final clause and the coincident but non-causal occurrence in the preceding line might, then, imply that all memories, affections, and happenings have a share in love, and they are experienced in their belonging together to this love. Not conditions of love, nor coincident with love, these non-causal causes of love nonetheless participate in love. They are means of loving though not means to the end of love.

The presence of these non-causal predicates changes how we understand the other set of penultimate clauses which, by contrast, do look causal, since they show that falling in love is not identical to an attraction to certain traits and gestures of another person. With every repetition of the clause “just for this,” then, it becomes increasingly apparent that love cannot depend on what follows as the content of that particular cause. The poem thus suggests that one does not love another person for a precise attribute of that person, or for a moment associated or shared with that person, yet neither does one love someone independent of any moment or any attribute. One loves *just because*, for everything that belongs to the love’s happening.



The video clip's collection of individually stylized explanations for breaking billboards mimics the recurrence of the same verse in every poem in Süreya's book. By modeling their framing on a renowned verse, protestors take up the expressive qualities of the poem. Just as Süreya's lines proliferate and sometimes sever the causality between love and its circumstances, the video's performers proliferate and sometimes sever the causality between their event—the breaking of a billboard—and its circumstances. Each account of the activity contributes to its architecture of meaning, and, together, these accounts demonstrate that, between the physical standing and forceful removal of billboards, there exist plural and incommensurable forms of connection. Mobilizing the non-instrumental linguistic status of the poem, and of poetry more generally, the video communicates motives and activities that, even when they are not identifiable as causal or instrumental, account for the actuality they bring about. Just as love exhibits simultaneous predicability, non-causality, and non-aggregation, so, too, do the politics of the clip, in imitating the architecture of Süreya's love poem, refuse instrumental motivations for action.

### **Mediality, pure violence, and play**

Like Süreya, Giorgio Agamben describes the object of love as a singularity, that is, as a “being such as it is”:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is.<sup>578</sup>

This terse reflection on love gestures towards Agamben's politics of mediality—means not directed to an end. Without being tied to a purposive intention, *medial* activity possesses a singularity, a form of orientation that Agamben associates with the field of a politics analogous to love. The “Breaking Billboards” clip, constituting itself through the architecture of the meaning of love in Süreya's poetry, exposes the medial constitution of political action.

How do we understand this move to an exposition of mediality? What are the implications of the clip, at the particular moment of its recording, for questions of in/civility, and framings of protest action? One could perhaps treat the performances as a form of prefigurative politics, which is to say, as adopting practices that seek to realize long-term ideals in the ‘here and now’ of the struggles.<sup>579</sup> The performers reconceptualize the distinction between political means and ends, to be sure, and yet unlike prefigurative political practice, they do not identify an end with which they align their means. They challenge the distinction not through the direct(ed)ness or direction that prefiguration entails,<sup>580</sup> but through the suspension of directionality altogether. Nonetheless, it might be unwise to dismiss prefiguration, for the video clip does seem to be prefigurative, if not of an end, then of a form of action that has its end in itself.

Like the protestors’ poetic detachment of their destructive activity from its presumed “practical-economic” ends, Agamben redefines politics as a field of action free from instrumentality.<sup>581</sup> For Agamben, a state’s dominion over political action can only be overcome by a form of playful praxis that refuses to be converted into a means to an end, a *praxis* that performs experiments in antinomian—post-juridical and post-sovereign—politics. To bring more fully into view activities that take on the mode of play, I turn to Agamben’s writings on mediality, paying close attention to how they have been influenced by Walter Benjamin.

Agamben develops the theme of medial activities primarily in the context of “pure violence,” an intricate product of his close engagement with Walter Benjamin’s writings. Pure violence, in Agamben’s conceptualization, exemplifies a means without an end and, thus, as pure mediality, most closely resembles play, activity that deinstrumentalizes apparatuses of power.<sup>582</sup> Pure violence, in its analogical resemblance to play, is essential to Agamben’s theorization of the sphere of “human action,” which—in his words—“once claimed for itself the name of ‘politics.’”<sup>583</sup>

It denotes a potentiality to destitute state violence, power, and authority “without negating them” and also “without establishing a new identity.”<sup>584</sup>

Presenting pure violence as an antidote to the violence underwriting state control, both in terms of the coercion a state exerts and as the pretext it uses for intervening in popular mobilizations, Agamben proposes a new approach to the state that would destitute its instrumental use of violence—not unlike role-playing at carnivals, in which “existing social relations are suspended or inverted.”<sup>585</sup> Characterized by a playful orientation, this approach refuses to “negotiate with the law.” As such, it is not bound to conform to, or justify itself against, the apparatuses of government.<sup>586</sup> In virtue of their similar non-relation to the state’s discourses of legality and legitimacy, the doubled layer of poetic moves of the video—the homage to Süreya in both form and content—are in synch with Agamben’s play-mode of action. To unpack such a playful, *non-relational* orientation towards a state in the video and in Agamben’s theory of destituent power, I elucidate in what follows the *relation* between a juridico-political order and violence, and how that relation can be rendered inoperative by play.

Violence occupies an exemplary conceptual position in Agamben’s thinking since it exhibits what he considers to be the fundamental articulating mechanism in politics—the inclusive exclusion. From a Schmittian point of departure, Agamben claims that the use of violence is a decisive sovereign action that stands behind all political and legal constructions.<sup>587</sup> In a relationship of “inclusive exclusion,” sovereign rule establishes itself by separating law (*nomos*) from anomie, and ruling out the latter only to include this exclusion as its foundation.<sup>588</sup> Accordingly, every existing political and juridical frame, for Agamben as for Schmitt, has a sovereign-exceptional decision at its center: an extra-legal force—an original “violence”—that establishes the political structure and is ceaselessly re-inscribed into the juridical order.<sup>589</sup> In

deciphering the articulation of sovereignty in relation to law and violence, Agamben is not, however, merely—or even primarily—guided by Schmitt. His more affirmative and recuperative engagement is with Benjamin.<sup>590</sup> Against Schmitt's attempts to incorporate extra-judicial violence back into the legal order, Agamben sides with Benjamin to unfold the relationship between law and violence and to bring about a space of action outside both.<sup>591</sup> In his reconstructive reading of Benjamin, Agamben works with a multilayered conceptual lens, which must be sorted out if we wish to understand this anomic space and its predicates, play and mediality.

Agamben relies particularly on “Critique of Violence,” in which Benjamin describes violence (*Gewalt*) as a means for both positing as well as preserving law. According to Benjamin, an entire legal tradition approaches the question of violence only through the two instrumental functions it serves: law-making and law-preserving.<sup>592</sup> Both natural and positive law theories consider violence as a means to an end, and both are concerned with the justification of means with respect to their outcomes. In fact, recourse to violence as a means is constantly justified by a broad spectrum of actors: a state deploys its coercive security forces to preserve the constitutional order, while revolutionaries—on the left and right alike—advocate violence as a means of establishing a new order.<sup>593</sup>

Benjamin's most revealing examples, the revolutionary general strike and the police, push against the limits of the constitutional order from opposite ends. On one end, an exercise of a legal right—the right to strike—escalates into a revolutionary situation, and puts the juridico-political order at risk of being overthrown.<sup>594</sup> On the other end, police violence is directed to preserving the law, and to securing the public order, although most police interventions occur when there is no clear threat to public safety.<sup>595</sup> The figure of the police, in this respect, embodies the state of exception, the sovereign right to be inside and outside the law when committing violence. The

place of the police in Benjamin's thought is crucially important both for Agamben and for my analysis of "Breaking Billboards." Exemplifying sovereignty's articulating mechanism, the police manifest the normalcy and normativity of exception in political rule, which, as we will see, also characterizes the political condition in Turkey. In his eighth thesis on the philosophy of history, Benjamin uses the phrase the "'state of exception' in which we live" to define this exceptional—arbitrary—oppression which has become the rule.<sup>596</sup>

However, the clash between diametrically opposed figures—police/revolutionaries—is only half the story. As Kevin Attell compellingly argues, Agamben's theory of sovereign exception, heavily indebted to Schmitt, is in fact only a provisional step before he takes up the political task that Benjamin had called for in the "Critique of Violence."<sup>597</sup> Against the dialectic of sovereignty and violence, that is, the "dialectical oscillation between the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it,"<sup>598</sup> Agamben highlights Benjamin's third figure, namely, "pure violence," which has the capacity to break the cycle of sovereign violence by practicing a form of power that "neither makes nor preserves law."<sup>599</sup> In other words, pure violence, in Agamben's interpretation, refers to the potentiality of "[abolishing] the state power" towards "a new historical epoch."<sup>600</sup> For Benjamin, this can be achieved only by inaugurating the "real state of exception" in the midst of the "state of exception in which we live."<sup>601</sup> The path to a new epoch, then, is to be found within the present conditions of the sovereign violence of police (very much like the conditions present during *Gezi*) by political praxes that "seek to trace paths out of" this loop of sovereign violence.<sup>602</sup> It is precisely these kinds of praxes that are materialized in "Breaking Billboards," to which I will return shortly.

The language of "purity" in the notion of "pure violence" might seem odd at first considering the term's moralistic baggage, which often implies innocence and/or virtue. However,

drawing further on Benjamin's writings, Agamben stresses that "purity" does not connote an absolute or original essence.<sup>603</sup> It is rather a "relational" concept, i.e. the result of a purification process.<sup>604</sup> In this case, the process grows out of the juridical uses of violence. Since purity in violence concerns the relation of violence to law, the purification process signifies violence's liberation from the ends of law.<sup>605</sup> In other words, the notion of purity at issue here is "not a substantial characteristic belonging to the violent action in itself." Purity refers instead to a contingent "deposition of the relation of violence and law."<sup>606</sup> It is for this reason that, for Agamben, pure violence is a proxy for pure means—mediality—which he develops through his accounts of non-instrumental use and play.

More precisely, Agamben interprets Benjamin's enigmatic quest for "finding a different kind of violence . . . that was not related to [just ends] as means at all but in some different way" as an abolition of the very idea of instrumental causality.<sup>607</sup> He uses "Critique" to break away from violence as a means to an end, and, moreover, to denounce *any* activity that orients to an end other than the activity's own *praxis*. Accordingly, what is at stake in politics for Agamben is not the justness of ends or means: since politics is "the field of human action and of human thought," it is the sphere of means "without end intended."<sup>608</sup> Echoing Aristotle's claim that action is in itself its own end—*entelecheia*—Agamben construes politics as a field of unbounded action that is not alienated from its own experience.<sup>609</sup> As Agamben further develops the notion of pure mediality, the concept's dependence on uses of violence loosens and mediality becomes the definitive characteristic of all political activities.

Extending the application of mediality beyond grand themes of violence, revolution, police, Agamben also turns to worldly and local forms of non-instrumentality—the festival, the Sabbath, and the like. This orientation, visible in "Hunger of an Ox" in *Nudities*, allows him to

reconceptualize politics in and through purely medial vernacular practices, and to privilege non-instrumental activity as the core of a new mode of politics: a politics of inoperativity. The disalignment of an activity from its conventional end is, for Agamben, an *inoperative* experiment insofar as it suspends the everyday economy of work. A playful use of objects, and of oneself, liberates activity from an economy of objectives and motives, and opens up possibilities for experimentation with new uses and social relations.<sup>610</sup> Like poetry, holidays and feasts are prime sites of inoperativity, since, during these festivities, we do what we do every day, like eating, walking, dressing up, and so on, yet without the same purposes.<sup>611</sup> The inoperativity of festivity figures a particular modality of acting and living, whose aim is to neutralize the "existing values and powers" assigned to activities and to open them to new uses.<sup>612</sup>

This elaboration of playful use elucidates Agamben's recuperative reading of the "Critique of Violence." Here is the very final paragraph of the chapter in which he analyzes Benjamin's "Critique":

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their conventional use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original use value that precedes the law, but a new use that is born only after it. And use, which has been contaminated by law, must also be freed from its own value. This liberation is the task of study, or of play.<sup>613</sup>

With its abrupt appearance in the text, play works as an analogy for new and unbounded relationalities: as a child's play is to objects of use, so is pure violence to the discourses of legality. Pure violence, analogously to a child's play—which deactivates instrumental uses of objects—presents a possibility for human action to deactivate legal discourses that otherwise conceive of violence only in relation to the ends of a juridico-political order. In other words, pure violence represents a medial *praxis* that "does not stand in a relation of means toward an end."<sup>614</sup> Through the play analogy, Agamben's appropriation of Benjamin's "pure violence" completes its course,

arriving at an image of human activity that can depose and outlast apparatuses of power in politics and, thus, create a world of new and free uses of activities, objects and selves.<sup>615</sup>

As in play, the poetic reasons in “Breaking Billboards” disrupt the instrumental connections between means and ends. In what follows, I place “Breaking Billboards” in conversation with Agamben’s theory of play, mediality, and pure violence. The category of play helps interpret the work of the clip as a meaning-making enterprise interrupting the common evaluations of radical protest with its poetic and non-instrumental representations. As mediality is the mode in which play presents itself, the playful making of the clip exhibits the medial character of protest activity, proclaiming its political character. If the clip is one way of engaging the question of violence involved in billboard-breaking, I show that its answer suspends this question by distorting the logic of instrumental causality inherent in judgements about violence as a means to an end, in order to change the parameters of the public debate. The account of pure violence elucidates this operation by exposing the specific mechanism of power operative in quests for civility in the face of exceptional violence exercised by the state. Amidst the exceptional violence, the clip reconstitutes ‘uncivil’ and ‘violent’ protest as political action, refusing to be bound by the state-imposed binary categories.

### **From the state of exception, in which we live...**

Ordinary politics in Turkey has long been in a state of exception. The suspension of law under emergency rule has been implemented regionally and periodically since the 1980 *coup d’etat*. As studies in contemporary Turkish political history stress, the long experience with emergency rule, where/when it has been implemented, has blurred boundaries between “exception” and “norm.”<sup>616</sup> Although the current single-party government of the *AKP* did not initiate the legal or administrative implementations of the state of exception, it has often made use of exceptional



measures. When facing social and political unrest, the *AKP* eagerly uses executive discretion with respect to a “limitless interpretation of the law” to subordinate law and order to sovereign fiat.<sup>617</sup> The party has also coupled an arbitrary application of law with coercive measures targeting political opponents. Against the backdrop of emergency politics, and confronting a government determined to suppress oppositional mobilization at any cost, *Gezi* protestors were exposed to injury and loss, and, simultaneously, to critiques of incivility and violence. Having been responsabilized within a space structured by violence, and with the meaning and effect of their collective action arbitrated by the government, the protestors had to find a way to respond to *the state of exception in which they lived*.

Under the *AKP* rule, part of the citizenry shares a collective unhappiness and despair that intensify with every new electoral cycle. Yet, in the case of *Gezi*, the bitter seriousness of persistent repression was met with vivid humor, and rich and polyvalent experiments in which cynical, surreal, and magical appropriations of reality took on festive and allegorical forms. Exemplifying such festivity, “Breaking Billboards” manifests protestors’ ability to free their imaginations from the brutal severity of the present. In stark opposition to the ongoing violence and conditions of emergency, the billboard breakers explain ‘what has happened’ through whimsical narratives *as if* they belong to a different order, one not entirely defined by violence or injury. Having been charged with violating common property and disturbing the public peace, the clip’s protestors dramatize violent conflict as a carnivalesque feast, in which social roles and relations of power are subverted. Police, the face of state sovereignty, become rivals in dodgeball. Damaged billboard frames are rings for fire-jumping.

Just as dance is a festive gesture in which bodies move not for an ambulatory end but, instead, to exhibit “the media character of corporal movements,” it is possible to read the clip’s

poetic representations of admittedly destructive acts as exhibitions of the media character of political action.<sup>618</sup> I take this reconstitutive exhibition to be the work of the video performance, revealing the political character of the protests. What is political from the vantage point of protestors becomes unmistakably political for a broader public when it appears from within an unaccustomed alteration of reality, a reality that had been at risk of being defined exclusively by the state. Given that the contestation between the protestors and the state was not over the facts but over meanings to be derived from those facts, the protestors' poetic distance from accustomed intents and purposes behind the factual makes it possible for them to seize its political meaning.

Instead of justifying the act of breaking billboards by reference to a larger cause, or as a necessary measure given the pressing circumstances of the mobilization, the video's actors mock, provoke, or disregard what is expected from them. As their speech acts invert the usual subordination of protest activity to reasons and ends as so often defined in a setting of conflict between a state and dissenters, they redeploy "uncivil" activity in the mode of play and thereby politicize it. This is not to say that the destructive and disorderly acts, including breaking, burning and blockading, are themselves non-purposive playful activities. Instead, by play I refer to the register on which the performers in the clip represent their protesting activity. As noted, there were instrumental reasons for breaking billboards as a response to police attacks; the video performances do not disavow these material triggers. What is at stake, however, is how the play-form alters *representations* of political action by refusing conventional impasses of civility discourse.

To put it differently, the notion of play that I borrow from Agamben helps us to see a transformation of the spaces of judgement within which the meaning and value of protest activities are arbitrated. Just as play deactivates the ordinary economy of activity along with its conventional

objectives, motives and intentions, so, too, does playful speech neutralize the routine link between ends and means, in view of which protest is identified and evaluated. Through the introduction of a multiplicity of modes of relationality between activities and intentions, the clip distorts the expected predicates of protest activity and, thus, frustrates the usual grounds of judgement.

Although the subject matter of the clip is “incivility,” in speaking about the destruction of public property and violence against police officers the protestors present neither a “critique” nor a “defense” of violence. One might perhaps infer from this ambiguity that the performers assert their “civility” through their use of humor, which, Serhat Karakayalı and Özge Yaka say, is an “instrument of ‘civility’”—not so much because it is non-violent but because it endows political space with fluidity and indeterminacy.<sup>619</sup> One could also argue that the clip invalidates the boundaries between civility and incivility, given the ease with which the performing protestors move from ‘uncivil demolition’ to ‘civil poetic speech.’ These would be valuable yet incomplete readings. As I see it, the protestors in the clip do not transform what is perceived as an ‘uncivil’ act into a ‘civil’ one, nor do they add a civil aspect to a protest that was at risk of losing its popular appeal. Rather, they seek to alter the ontology of their acts as well as the parameters of their acts’ representations and receptions by rendering inoperative the categories of means-ends and of in/civility.

Constituted in the mode of play, the clip exemplifies Benjamin’s pure violence precisely by *not* invoking violence either for or against its use in the insurgency. It rather estranges viewers from the predominant templates of representation and signification that are often applied to insurgent protest. My reading of the clip here may still suggest a particular understanding of the “civil and civic” character of resistance—like that of Robin Celikates—since the ‘estrangement’ I point out may well be understood as indicative of the protestors’ search for “a stage and an

audience,” a civic bond to be forged between dissidents and the broader public.<sup>620</sup> Nevertheless, my point is not to discern in the video performance a demonstration of civility or incivility *per se*, but to illuminate the ways in which it refuses this dichotomy, which, as Celikates also argues, “governments pursue [as] a tactic of divide and conquer with regard to protest.”<sup>621</sup> In this refusal, I find the groundwork of a new edifice of meaning that challenges and changes the very topography of protest and political action.

The meaning-making enterprise of the performers is mediated by an intervention in the governable economy of justification and instrumental causality by way of its simultaneously incommensurable and coincidental relationality. Just as Süreya’s poems account for a myriad of qualities (a glitter, voice, memory) co-belonging to the happening of an event (love) without essentially originating or defining it, so does the clip present protest activity as political action without folding it into a finite map of intended ideals and appropriate measures. The performers’ recourse to poetry, therefore, is not incidental. In Süreya’s poems, they find the modality of constitution proper to politics. Poetic speech—different from the quotidian use of language—communicates meaning in the absence of functionality or normativity.<sup>622</sup> It is this communicability that the protestors’ performance exhibits. Addressing the sphere of mediality, Agamben writes, “it is only in this way that the obscure Kantian expression ‘purposiveness without purpose’ acquires a concrete meaning.”<sup>623</sup> If the clip appears to be both purposive and not purposive at the same time, it is because of the nature of medial action. Play underwrites poetry and politics, both of which call attention to their own *praxes*.

In their playful speeches, the protestors display the potential to forget the purposes of their destructive acts, just as the inhabitants of Agamben’s “Playland” do. Borrowing from Émile Benveniste’s study of play, Agamben describes players as “busy celebrating rituals, and

manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten.”<sup>624</sup> In play, the functional uses of objects are renounced or substituted by retaining some characteristics of their former uses, as children play with cars and airplanes, or cats play with yarn.<sup>625</sup> This forgetfulness and renunciation, staged in the play-form, inspires a new relationality to the law and state—one that is hinted at by pure violence.

Just as in play the new use of an object as a toy deactivates the instrumental value of a formerly functional object, so too do the non-purposive representations of protest activity in the video clip deactivate the state’s sovereign narrative that seeks to delegitimize resistance in the plane of instrumental causality and normative classification. By shifting the plane of instrumental thinking, the clip points to a new antinomian order in which law is substituted by play. While insurgent protests mark the availability of the use of force in the suspension of formal norms for “both the ruling power and its adversaries,” the *Gezi* protestors in the clip turn down the idea of a justifiable violence to take up the Benjaminian task of halting the working of the sovereign exception.<sup>626</sup>

Their playful speeches, dramatizing the struggle within the state of exception, offer striking glimpses of a *real state of exception* in Benjamin’s sense, a space for human action that neither submits to nor confronts state authority, law, or order. In response to the simultaneous delegitimization of radical political activities and the reinforcement of the police forces’ radical measures—underwritten by the inclusive exclusion of sovereign violence—the clip reintroduces violence yet does not re-inscribe it within a context of legitimization. In the new imaginary of “Breaking Billboards,” the destituted law of Benjamin and Agamben’s theories, which “no longer has force or application,” changes from metaphorical form into concrete political practice.<sup>627</sup>

As Gezi's "uncivil" protestors deliberately disregard the question of civility, they create an unmanageable, unruly, and disorderly space, constructed in and through non-instrumental speech. Their speeches sound *as if* they are from a different world—not bound by the everyday use of language or objects, but in play with them, gesturing to a mode of being that plays with law. In their poetic substitutions of reality, the protestors detach from aspects of ordinary politics that “no longer do affirming work” for them.<sup>628</sup> As the ordinary reality—the state of exception in which they live—captures political actors in an incapacitated state, poetry, in contrast, opens a path—a real state of exception—along which it becomes possible for actors to discover and then affirm their political engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Governments across the globe increasingly converge in their responses to the radical milieus occupied by popular movements. Their common strategy is founded upon a portrayal of protestors as deviant and dangerous, an image that they can capitalize on to coercively repress mobilization.<sup>629</sup> It is chillingly observable today that, be it in Turkey or Chile, a quite similar set of “anti-terrorism” laws are being deployed by distinct ruling administrations to criminalize dissident activities.<sup>630</sup> Having been outlawed and delegitimized by state authorities, protestors are then exposed to police violence under the banner of public safety, while being, at the same time, required to express dissent through “civil” and “non-violent” means. As protesting crowds are deemed “vandals,” “looters,” or “criminals,” state officials also invoke, often in kindred terms, a “silent majority,” ordinary people who are intimidated, disturbed, and/or distressed by dissident mobilizational activities in the streets.<sup>631</sup> Though lacking a concrete referent, discourses of “silent majority”—framed quite similarly, for example, in the U.S. during the waves of BLM protests or Hong Kong's anti-government mobilizations—prove effective in circumscribing the coordinates

of public debate in favor of the *status quo*. Distinguishing “law-abiding” citizens from “criminals,” such statist framings seek to marginalize protestors from the rest of the (ordinary) population and thereby deprive their concerted action from its “political” meanings.

In this context, “Breaking Billboards” demonstrates the protestors’ awareness that they have been predefined by the state as violent militants and uncivil marauders. However, this awareness does not lock them into a defensive posture. Instead, adopting a means—poetry—playfully removed from the conditions of a popular uprising, they confront the regime’s state of exception with their own creative and created state of exception. As their performances take place at the threshold of the real and surreal, actual and absurd, the protestors distort the public’s familiarity with ongoing political debates, which take disorder and violence as their object.

Today, eight years after the long summer of *Gezi*, and under the uninterrupted rule of the *AKP*, the empowering impact of the protests is still alive in public memory. Barricade zones, symbols of autonomous spaces beyond the reach of the state, are material and figurative reminders of the political power of the people. This power is not to be measured by total property damage, but by the protestors’ capacity to act politically and to own their actions—however damaging or disturbing those actions might be—and to author the accounts of what they are doing. Though “Breaking Billboards” is not a conclusive representation of the dynamics of *Gezi*, it exhibits a collective capacity, borrowing Erin Pineda’s words, “to enact agency and freedom in the midst of domination.”<sup>632</sup> Like *Gezi*’s other “innovative practices,” the clip’s creative enactment of freedom “speaks to current condition” across the world.<sup>633</sup>

The political poetry of “Breaking Billboards” passes over the statist critique of violence by refusing to address violence as an organizing principle. Yes, billboards are broken. Meanwhile, the government is oppressive, and police are coercive, metropolitans are deprived of green space,

the poor are deprived of a living wage, women are reprimanded, the media is censored, minorities are threatened, and students are silenced, each brought into line, or into court. The long list—by no means unique to Turkey—lays bare the point that the intensity of violence and damage to public property should not be the issues leading public debate. By adding one rationale after another, the speeches in the video clip demonstrate that *anything* could have been a reason to break a billboard—in the same way that, in Süreya’s poetry, anything could have been a reason to love someone. By dramatically multiplying the potential objectives and intentions behind their uncivil activity, the protestors’ playful speeches leave us with what remains, that is, the mediality of a political act. Billboards are broken *because the struggle continues*, and, in the words of one billboard breaker, because people “are worth it.”

Reconfiguring the representations and receptions of radical protests activities, “Breaking Billboards” speaks from *Gezi* to broad geographies of struggle and contention, where the desires, aspirations, and exasperations of the oppressed are at risk of erasure and silencing anew. It unsettles the conventional means-and-ends schema of action, reconstituting violent, unruly, uncivil, disorderly, destructive, justifiable or unjustifiable actions as *political* action. Where does this claim leave us with respect to the debates around incivility and violence? It is difficult to say that the protestors’ video performance offers a ‘right’ or a ‘wrong’ concerning the clashes at the barricades. However, if taken as a “meaning-making enterprise,” the clip’s offering comes closest to what Wendy Brown attributes to political theory: It “recodes and rearranges the meanings to reveal something about the meanings and incoherencies that we live with.”<sup>634</sup> The clip’s work is both revelatory, disclosing the differential standards protestors and police are held to, and, at the same time, speculative, asking a *what-if* question: *What if protestors break billboards less in order to resist the police attacks than to realize a new set of independent, indeterminate purposes?* The



speculative question does not demand a specific answer, but works as an “incitement to thought, imagination, desire.”<sup>635</sup> By thus displacing instrumental and normative imperatives governing action, the clip opens a space for reflection between statist discourses in circulation and possible alternatives. After all, what might be more likely to renew meanings than rehearsing a world of objects and words, “whose sense and purpose are [...] forgotten” in play?<sup>636</sup>

As a poetic and political performance, “Breaking Billboards” contributes to a global revolutionary aesthetic emerging from different sites of protest. For example, during the Hong Kong uprising in 2019, sparked by the government’s introduction of an extradition bill that would have allowed criminal suspects to stand trial in mainland China, the urban landscape turned into an exhibit for walls of Post-it sticky notes (“Lennon Walls” as locals call them) and other creative displays. While these spaces gave expression to a plethora of modes of dissent, including profanity and satire, the slogan of the movement became “be water,” adopted from Bruce Lee and “signifying that the protesters’ actions should be adaptable, tactical, fast and spontaneous—the way water flows through cracks in a structure.”<sup>637</sup> Blending (martial) arts and strategy with public expression and debate, Hong Kong’s “Water Revolution,” like *Gezi*, manifested the multifaceted constitution of popular mobilization in contrast with official state narratives, which equate protesting crowds (the number of which amounts to 2 out of Hong Kong’s 7 million residents) to terrorists and rioters.<sup>638</sup> Consider, too, the example of a viral Reddit video featuring Chilean protestors, who, during the country-wide mobilization against economic inequality in late 2019 and early 2020, took down a law-enforcement “drone” by using standard run-of-the-mill laser pointers—a tactic they in fact learned from the viral videos of their counterparts in Hong Kong.<sup>639</sup> Protestors in these locations invented and publicized ‘counter-drone measures’ in order to evade their respective states’ exceptional, yet increasingly normalized, ‘counter-insurgency measures.’

Even more illustratively, in November 2019, the creators of the famous performance piece “A Rapist in Your Path” (“*Un Violador en Tu Camino*”), the Chilean feminist collective *Las Tesis*, adapted their original work (which broadly called out rape culture and women’s oppression) to the ongoing street protests, directly addressing the systemic use of sexual and other violence by police. Since its initial staging at several locations in Santiago, the piece, with its infectious rhythm and trenchant lyrics, has been performed by thousands of women “in over 200 locations around the world.”<sup>640</sup> Ironically, after the performance in Istanbul had been violently broken up by police, female representatives of the opposition parties sang the song in the parliament of Turkey, “the only country in which [one] must have (parliamentary) immunity to participate,” as one lawmaker stated.<sup>641</sup> “A rapist in your path” is far removed from a politics of respectability or decorum expected of protestors, particularly women. It rather includes “in-your-face physical movements,” such as squat-downs to imitate the stance women are forced to assume upon arrest, and expressions of “female rage” with accusatory fingers pointed at the state for its role in promoting policies that accelerate the premature death of women.<sup>642</sup> At the same time, just as “Breaking Billboards” reconstitutes disparaged and defamed protestors as “political” agents, so does “A Rapist in Your Path” reconstitute women’s bodies as “powerful, accusatory, and enraged.”<sup>643</sup> In doing so, as Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw also point out, the feminist performance piece “produces the female body as both subject and object, as both resistant and subjugated,” by way of its critique of the patriarchal state apparatus—a critique that is at once expository and transformative.<sup>644</sup>

Ultimately, these poetic protests performances are politically significant for their ability to cultivate collective empowerment from within conditions of subjugation, injury, and/or rage, producing an embodied sense of agency among participants and spectators. If they appear to contravene norms of “civility,” it is because they take their departure from an understanding that

these norms are almost always already bound up with relations of power that expect only “peaceful acquiescence” from oppressed citizens while condoning systematic, sexualized and racialized, state violence.<sup>645</sup> More importantly, they demonstrate a “refusal” to use the terms imposed by the state, as well as a commitment to transform the existent terrain of political debate and engagement into an alternative one in which the agents of political action are not alienated from the experience of their action but instead can engage one another in affirming and empowering terms.



**A repurposed billboard, Ankara**

## Conclusion

### Performative and non-performative assemblies

Narrative, Toni Morrison explains in her Nobel lecture, “is radical, creating us the very moment it is being created.”<sup>646</sup> My dissertation opened with the *Gezi Spirit*, a narrative of such creative capacity shaping the dispositions and aspirations of protestors as much as it was shaped by them. As I have laid out, prevalent *Gezi Spirit* narratives were centered around what was taken to be a ‘heterogenous alliance’ across distinct and, at times, conflicting identity groups. Embodied in the assertion ‘everyone was there,’ the unifying force of the Spirit was the hallmark of the mobilization put forward by most participants and sympathetic commentators. Ironically, and less deservedly, the exact same assertion, as we have also seen, was employed by organizers of the 2016 pro-regime Democracy Watches to evoke pride and elation in achieving a broad popular front.

Accordingly, on sympathetic accounts of *Gezi*, multifarious groups were able to come together because they had overcome their disagreements and discrepancies in the ‘Spirit’ of the movement. Important to my critical analysis in chapter one is that this alliance was perceived not only as a prefiguration of a reconciled society but also as an “embodiment” of theories of left populism and popular assembly that associate protesting masses with incipient forms of popular sovereignty.<sup>647</sup> I discussed two iconic aesthetic representations to illustrate the parallel between these political and theoretical orientations—a photograph featuring two protestors, a nationalist-Kemalist and a pro-Kurdish party supporter escaping the police hand in hand, and images of an Armenian youth organization at *Gezi Park*’s occupation—both exemplifying an imagined “remedy to the seemingly unending cycle of political polarization.”<sup>648</sup> There is more to the aesthetics of diversity/heterogeneity, including the icon of “Istanbul United”—an imaginary soccer team of the city fusing the three existing rival teams united in resistance<sup>649</sup>—and the photographs of observant

Muslim protestors performing a Friday prayer while surrounded by Marxist-Leninist groups forming a corporeal barrier between prayers and police, to which I return shortly.

First, however, a brief recap of the aesthetics of *Gezi-Spirit* is in order. I have argued that such aesthetics undergirded regimes of representation and legitimation that challenged the analogous regimes deployed by the *AKP*: *Gezi Spirit* embraced a heterogenous assembly energized in the streets, squares, parks, and barricades as a counter to the majoritarian identification of the *AKP* and its ballot-box supremacy. The affective lure of the *Gezi Spirit* was, to borrow from Christina Beltrán's diagnostic reading of Latinx politics in the U.S., "not only strategic but also emotive and experiential."<sup>650</sup> Its symbolic structure of unification, I have shown, functioned as an emblem of pride, motivating the distinct constituent elements of *Gezi* to remain in the streets despite police brutality. This symbolic structure, I argued, produced a record of the event as an eminent historical moment effectively and affectively diminishing politically charged discrepancies among social groups. The terrain of political action and debate I have reconstructed is, in many ways, similar to the Latinx movement in Beltrán's account, as many participants, supporters, and sympathetic observers of *Gezi* also agreed that the mobilization was "most empowered" when dissidents were able to act as "a united community, animated by a common agenda and striding across the national stage with direction and intent."<sup>651</sup>

Though efficacious, self-affirming, and vitalizing, the trope *Gezi Spirit*, as I demonstrated, was not without drawbacks. Sublimated to a quasi-mythical force, it worked at times to police dissenting voices within the heterogenous alliance so as not to imperil the unity tasked with standing against the regime with a resilient and robust will. With its investments in positive heterogeneity, on the one hand, and remedial cohesion, on the other, the mobilization sometimes presented unity and difference as trade-offs, often tilting the balance in favor of the former. As

Jodi Dean points out in a different context, efforts to “suppress debate and claim unity in the face of plurality has been a major problem for a variety of groups and movements,” including those undertaken by the marginalized and excluded.<sup>652</sup> In the case of Turkey, suppression of difference and disagreement was, I proposed, the result of a defensive style of thought—an insistence on responding to the government’s *constituted sovereign power* with an insurgent and equally consolidated *constituent power of the people*. This distinct oppositional condition, in my view, could not be thought apart from the evaluations and expectations raised by global and local spectators of protest movements who had so often indexed the political significance of movements to their ability to enact a sovereign popular body, a united hegemonic bloc.

The uneasy relationship between unity and difference “on the ground” in Turkey is not new to democratic theory. In this dissertation I have interrogated it largely through ‘constituent power’ theories. It has also been studied, lived through, and worked out in critical feminist theory. Problematizing both liberal and critical democratic theory’s “tendency to suppress difference” across identity, affiliation, experience, and perspective, Iris Marion Young, for example, suggests that democratic theory should learn from social movements that uphold the “positivity of group difference” rather than complying with an “ideal of universal citizenship that transcends group differences.”<sup>653</sup> Foregrounding difference, particularity, the body, and feeling, Young’s analyses reconstruct the public realm of politics as expressive of plurality and alterity, and constituted by discomfort, passion, and anger as much as by play and communication. Such politics of difference, on Young’s account, is found among marginalized groups, such as “Black women, Latinas, Jewish women, lesbians, differently abled women, old women [...] silenced in a general feminist discourse,” who resignify alterity as emancipatory rather than exclusionary.<sup>654</sup>

Young's engagement with these groups, as Beltrán deftly points out, presents a “laudatory effort.” It is also susceptible to a certain idealization depicting “marginalized social groups as inherently transgressive.”<sup>655</sup> Beltrán, for her part, demonstrates an active willingness to criticize episodic oppressive and exclusive practices of communities that are themselves identified as oppressed. Beltrán takes as her case the political activism of the U.S. Latinx population, which, as she reminds, is a considerably “opaque” category, increasingly diverse by subgroup, region, and race.<sup>656</sup> The *Gezi* protestors, unlike the concept of *Latinidad*, do not signify an ascriptive category. Hence, they are not entangled in questions of homogeneity or unity in the same way the Latinx community is. Nonetheless, the *Gezi* protestors were quite similarly gripped by an “urge to unity—the desire for security, symmetry, and social wholeness.”<sup>657</sup> The politics of unification lurking around the mobilization in Turkey called for, not a shared ascriptive identity, but a general will demanding everyone to leave behind their particularities and differences. Frictions within the movement—groups *asking for too much*—were deemed to diminish the effectiveness and legitimacy of the movement, giving the upper hand to the *AKP* government's portrayal of protestors in pejorative terms.

With Beltrán, I have presented “internal diversity” (in the case of *Gezi*, in terms of perspectives, priorities, desires, strategies, and aspirations) as a condition to be creatively navigated “rather than merely endured,” repressed, or disavowed.<sup>658</sup> I have also contributed to Beltrán's criticism of democratic theory's reluctance to apply its insights to the internal power dynamics of oppressed groups.<sup>659</sup> A similar reflexive critique is much needed today in the wake of proliferating theoretical engagements with world-wide protests of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the newfound enthusiasm in political theory to articulate politics and peoplehood in tandem with popular mobilizations has aptly broadened the semantic horizons of political categories like

sovereignty, authority, legitimacy, and body politic into nonsanctioned spaces of protest, such as streets, squares, parks, and barricades, it has also carried within it the pitfalls and idealization that Beltrán sees in Young's account.

I have illustrated these pitfalls and idealization through close engagements with the theories of 'performative assembly' and 'populism' offered respectively by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, as well vernacular accounts that draw from these theories in their studies of the *Gezi* Protests. These predominant accounts, I argued, privilege dissenting protestors (over political authorities and non-dissenting, indifferent, or consenting, publics) for articulating and mediating a popular will. In doing so, they often overlook *other wills* that are not represented, voices that are silenced or not heard. Prioritizing the enactment of an authorized and authorizing popular body from-below, theorizations of sovereignty, I maintain, tend to efface, even if momentarily, the "many wills and intentions" that do not become *the* will of a mythic people and instead are omitted, contained, or suppressed.<sup>660</sup> Similarly, political actors, too, when motivated by the evident *power* of speaking with one voice, tend to become more protective of unity and agreement, policing the discordant, disruptive, and noncompliant voices which they see as jeopardizing that power.<sup>661</sup>

A notable theoretical articulation of such power is Butler's performative construction of the utterance "we, the people." Engaging Butler's theorization of 'the people,' I suggested that, while words and claims can be performative, bringing into existence what they say, exhibit, or name, they can also be *non*-performative, *not* bringing into effect what they claim.<sup>662</sup> This was particularly the case, we have seen, when repeated citations of protestors' diverse identities in scholarly and popular circles were unaccompanied by accounts of the corroborating practices that would open space for unrestrained expression and debate. In the absence of sufficiently active attention to and affirmation of diverse identities, perspectives, and visions, such citations, I



cautioned, risked reifying identities at the expense of their autonomy and self-expression. Under these circumstances, prominent public and scholarly treatments of the *Gezi Spirit* operate as what Sara Ahmed calls “nonperformative” speech acts.

Studying the widespread invocations of the term “diversity” in settings of higher education, Ahmed brings into view the instances “when naming something does not bring something into effect, or when something is named in order not to bring something into effect,”<sup>663</sup> when, in Ahmed’s example, the practice of *diversity talk* does not necessarily indicate an institutional commitment to redress social and material inequalities which require *action*.<sup>664</sup> Thus, the utterance of the word “diversity” does not perform what it promises, that is an actual transformation into a more “diverse” and equitable institutional setting. My critical account of the *Gezi Spirit*, then, should be read as an expansion of Ahmed’s critique to the site of popular mobilizations: When an assembly calls itself “the people,” does it perform that identificatory claim, as well? If an assembly believes that it is entitled to peoplehood, because it includes diverse social groups, should we trust that it also delivers the promise of “diversity”?

To be clear, I do not think speech acts can be *either* performative *or* nonperformative. Instead, I understand performativity *and* nonperformativity to map out a spectrum of efficacy with simultaneous and reciprocal activation. Neither do I suggest that iconic images as symbols of reconciliation and coexistence do not matter. Symbols are powerful for a good reason: they transform our imaginations and desires about the kinds of world we want to inhabit. They provide us with hope, passion, perhaps faith. They contribute to from-below, local, vernacular knowledge production, and incite curiosity, experimentation, and a desire for something new, untried, even unimaginable. Still, Ahmed’s critique is noteworthy and illustrative of the shortcomings of a performative theory of popular assemblies, prompting us to be attentive to when and how symbolis

can distract political energies away from the work of addressing material injustices, that is, when we take “saying” for “doing,” when our words start “function[ing] as a substitute for action.”<sup>665</sup>

My dissertation has sought to demonstrate that peoplehood, assembly, diversity, heterogeneity, the *Gezi Spirit* are *not* performative—and that assuming that they are could in fact make them all the more nonperformative. With that caution, I have recommended that we shift our political and theoretical investments away from tropes of popular sovereignty to a collective desire that is generated through creative praxes of refusal which activate social capacities, such as interactive learning, solidarity, mutual care, responsibility, and responsivity—what Fred Moten calls a “nonstate sociality.”<sup>666</sup> In that case, the parameters of mobilization would not be success or failure (to enact a people, to reclaim popular sovereignty, to relocate popular will) but potentials and promises, which do not reside in any authorizing body but circulate across bodies and spaces. Let me complete my explanation of this claim through two examples.

### **Experiential and dialogical pedagogies of *Gezi***

During the *Gezi* Protests, many young unaffiliated protestors, attending a demonstration for the first time in their lives, met police brutality also for the first time. As the third chapter has shown, the protests were considered ‘mass’ not only for the numbers they attracted, but for attracting groups that had otherwise been absent from mobilizational activities. What made *Gezi* unique and curious was the unprecedented participation of middle-class, professional, and urban ‘white’ Turks—a colloquial attribute in Turkish language denoting at once class privilege, educational/professional status, and ethnicity.<sup>667</sup>

Prior to *Gezi* and across Turkey’s republican history, the usual targets of the state’s extra-legal coercion were primarily the “country’s alleged internal enemies”—Kurds, Alevis, non-Muslims, and socialists.<sup>668</sup> At *Gezi*, as we saw in the fourth chapter, the state resorted brutally and

indiscriminately to coercion under the rubric of public order and safety. In this statist framework, *all* protestors were assigned normatively charged labels—violent, destructive, uncivil, looter, illegitimate, extremist, fanatic. From an encounter between the old and new targets of state violence, some first-time protestors learned something important: police could resort to violence against civilians arbitrarily and with impunity. Improvising a collective self-defense in overwhelming fogs of teargas, stampede, and chaos, young ‘white’ Turks became acquainted with the other (or “true”) face of the state—the one that does not protect but injures.<sup>669</sup>

To add insult to injury, the disproportionate use of coercion by the police, during the first few days of the protests, did not seem to have much ‘news’ value: none of the news channels in the mainstream media broadcast what was going on at *Gezi* Park / Taksim Square or in the streets leading to the Park and Square.<sup>670</sup> But, as contemporary visual artist Fırat Engin would soon capture in his work, if the revolution was not going to be “televised,” it would surely be “tweeted.”<sup>671</sup> Against the rampant institutional bias in media, Twitter became a popular source of news. According to NYU’s Social Media and Political Participation laboratory, over a 24-hour period on May 31, 2013, “at least 2 million tweets mentioning hashtags related to the protest, such as #direnGeziparkı (950,000 tweets), #occupyGezi (170,000 tweets) or #Geziparki (50,000 tweets)” had been sent, ninety percent of these coming from demonstrators on the ground.<sup>672</sup>

Growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of media coverage, many on Twitter then asked: *Can we trust what we see on the news anymore?* Not merely rhetorical, the question triggered a broader debate about the participation of the news media, through willful ignorance and concealment, in systematic military assaults on civilian Kurdish populations ongoing for more than three decades.<sup>673</sup> While some protestors “might have eventually left the streets with the same world-view they had at the beginning of the protests,” as Oğuzhan Göksele and Ömer Tekdemir

point out, others “experienced a profound transformation” with respect to their understandings of the “Kurdish question” and its continued “securitization/militarization” by the state’s “national security discourse.”<sup>674</sup> As evidenced in the interviews conducted by Göksel and Tekdemir, *Gezi* marked a crucial moment for a variety of oppositional groups (Kemalists, libertarians, socialists, and social democrats) to question their long-standing investments in the state as “provider of security” and as “benevolent paternal figure [...] protecting them from foreign and domestic enemies.”<sup>675</sup> The conventional security paradigm, instrumental to justifications of the use of military forces to deal with the ‘Kurdish question’ (i.e., the democratic demands of the Kurdish political movement, such as decentralized governance and language rights), came to a collapse once protestors recognized that—in the words of a Kemalist protestor—“if this state could brutally repress Turks carrying Turkish flags and Atatürk flyers, it could very well murder and torture other people who are not even Turkish.” The “reports of human rights violations committed in the east” that they had heard at some point in their lives without being much moved suddenly gained a more concrete reality, prompting them to ask: “*Is this still our state?*”<sup>676</sup>

Similarly, one banner at the demonstrations, possibly brought by a Kurdish protestor, read: “Now, do you understand why every Kurd has two satellites in their home?” The question was a reference to the Kurdish households’ need for their own local channels in order to be “informed about the *news*,” given that the “Turkish media” either manipulates or does not show at all what goes on in Kurdish regions of the country.<sup>677</sup> The non-coverage of state violence during *Gezi* raised doubts about how much civilian loss might have gone unnoticed or been legitimized by patriotic and militarist narratives disseminated by the mainstream media. With these doubts, protestors questioned their habitual affective investments in official narratives of the primacy of “immortality and continuity of the state” employed pervasively in media reports on the Kurdish movement.<sup>678</sup>

Some Turkish Twitter users began thinking out loud about whether they owed an acknowledgement, if not an apology, to their fellow Kurdish, citizens.<sup>679</sup> Learning by experience through collective action, encounter, dialogue, surprise, confusion, and frustration, participants and spectators of *Gezi* cooperated in what we might call a pedagogy of protest.

These pedagogical gains, Goksel and Tokdemir argue, remain as an “under-studied” aspect of the mobilization.<sup>680</sup> In my view, they are also under-theorized, in the sense that the theoretical stakes of *Gezi*’s experiential and dialogical pedagogies have been underexplored. While much theoretical reflection on *Gezi* affirmatively emphasize the co-existence of distinct, and at times conflicting, groups, less has been said about the material and political implications and impacts of such co-existence—its potentials and promises, as noted, as well as disavowals and ambiguities.<sup>681</sup> *Gezi* produced *both* experiential learning, reflection, and transformation as well as hesitation, reservation, and silencing. As we saw in the first chapter of this dissertation, *Gezi*’s public forums served as civic platforms where members of marginalized communities shared their inherited experiences of decades-long struggle and voiced their demands. But their voices were also often at risk of being policed, as forum facilitators would seek ‘moderation’ from hardline Turkish nationalists and outspoken Kurdish activists, which usually meant avoiding heated debates around democratic rights. But then, next to that, consider the plethora of self-reflective social media posts raising questions like “*if we experienced this much state terror in two weeks, just imagine what kind of suffering the Kurds must have lived through in the east for more than thirty years?*”<sup>682</sup>

The reason I put these two examples side by side is to stress the need for a more profound engagement with much-cited qualities of *Gezi*—co-existence, encounter, diversity, heterogeneity, and the *Spirit*—with an attention to the complex materialities, promises, and shortcomings they carry within them. The self-reflective and critical thinking in the social media postings noted above

is exemplary of an unprecedented collective critique of, and dealignment with, statist national security discourses. Even though Kurdish protestors' rights claims were not always welcome, coupled with the ongoing conditions of violence and injury, they were not ineffective, either. They created conditions, albeit fragile, for liberation from official militarist state ideologies. *Gezi* thus served significant pedagogical purposes by, what Paulo Freire calls, "de-ideologizing" (bringing out into the open) the mechanisms of oppression and "dislodge[ing]" Turkish citizens from a "mythological reality" (which they had been learning in schools, singing in anthems, seeing on the media) to open the possibility of "'bind[ing]' them to another reality."<sup>683</sup>

In Freire's perspective, such a reconstructed relationship with reality requires "dialogical action" that "does not impose, [...] does not domesticate, does not 'sloganize.'"<sup>684</sup> *Gezi*, in my view, manifests "the dialogical character" of pedagogical protest when it does not sloganize around romantic narratives of the Spirit nor domesticate its plural contending voices.<sup>685</sup> In dialogical mobilizations, "reflection" and "action," Freire claims, constitute two essential and interdependent conditions of liberation, which leads him to conclude that, "since liberation must be a permanent condition, dialogue becomes a continuing aspect of liberating action."<sup>686</sup>

When reflection and action are aligned, as in the case of skepticism about national security discourses, then speech acts are truly performative, validating their own praxis. Taking their departure from a "critical analysis of a problematic reality" and maintaining a "consistency between words and actions," speech acts in the form of dialogical action can transform that reality.<sup>687</sup> Under such conditions, words do not substitute for action. Rather, they function as action, performing their own praxis. Moreover, the question of whether "saying" is mistaken for "doing" would cease to be a question, as speaking agents would practice what they utter by making the impacts and implications of their speeches an object of ongoing critical reflection. If I am right

to argue that popular assembly is not inherently performative, i.e., not always enacting peoplehood in the plural terms it claims for itself, then dialogical action, with its caution against domestication and romanticization, might be a more promising heuristic for protest movements from which to draw lessons for democratic theory.

While Freire's approach to dialogical action offers a useful framework to engage the experience of protestors at *Gezi*, it is difficult, and beyond my intentions here, to make conclusive claims about the lasting impacts of the pedagogies of the *Gezi* mobilization. And yet, it is worth noting relationships between short-term mobilization and longer-term social change in the afterlives of the summer 2013 protests. Although the *Gezi* Resistance has not generated its own political party—to the disappointment of some—there has been a broadening of both the political platform and popular appeal of the Peoples' Democratic Party (*HDP*), the institutional voice of the Kurdish movement. The *HDP*, which entered the political arena in 2012, has continued to politicize around the issues *Gezi* placed on public agenda, including economic equity, environmental justice, women's and LGBTQ+ rights, nonviolence, and equality in access to the instruments of government.<sup>688</sup> The party has nominated candidates from underrepresented and marginalized groups in all municipal and national elections, while foregrounding struggles against concessions of "people's commons to partisan capitalist circles, against the corruption of ecological balance, against urban transformation based on profit."<sup>689</sup>

*HDP*'s identification with the *Gezi* Resistance, which it described as the "democratic future of Turkey,"<sup>690</sup> has been reciprocated by augmented popular support in the post-*Gezi* elections (first in the 2014 presidential and then, more substantially, in the June 2015 national elections), during which the party was able to reach beyond the established pro-Kurdish electorate in the southeast, "obtaining a considerable amount of its votes in predominantly Turkish western cities such as

Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Bursa, Antalya, Kocaeli, and Aydın” and even from “predominantly Kemalist strongholds of Istanbul such as Kadıköy, Beşiktaş, Bakırköy, and Şişli,” where the *Gezi* Protests were most attended.<sup>691</sup> To be sure, *HDP*’s vote share (about 13%) indicates that it is not the case that participants in the *Gezi* demonstrations have overwhelmingly voted for the party. But it does suggest that previously nonexistent alignments became possible in the electoral field following the alliances formed in the streets.

Be that as it may, if the June 2015 elections demonstrated the potentials for multi-ethnic cooperation against securitization/militarization, the November 2015 re-run demonstrated the fragility of those potentials. Unable to form another single-party government in June, Erdoğan, after ending peace talks with the Kurdish Liberation Movement (*PKK*) and resuming the state’s security operations in Kurdish regions, went to a snap-election in November and regained a simple majority in the parliament. From June to November, violence escalated between Turkish security forces and the *PKK*-affiliated youth movement, causing social turmoil, panic, and fear, accompanied by an inexorable return of the national security discourse in the media. In this context of post-electoral violence and instability, *HDP*’s share decreased to just above the 10% threshold.

Security operations lasted into the post-election era, destroying Kurdish towns and neighborhoods with tanks, airstrikes, and artillery, implementing months-long curfews, cutting off electricity, water, phonelines, and Internet, blocking access to medical care; and displacing some 350,000 civilians in the process. According to Crisis Group’s fatality tally, last updated on 29 April 2021, at least 5,372 people have been killed in military attacks since 2015, including 545 civilians.<sup>692</sup> While the region bore the disastrous impacts of the Turkish state’s counter-insurgency measures, the national security discourse gained currency among the Turkish population in the west, which largely remained silent amidst the atrocities committed by the militarized special



operations units. This indifference and apathy presented not only tacit support for the *AKP*—alongside more explicit support reflected in the party’s increased vote share in the snap-election—but also a retreat from *Gezi*’s enormous potentials for recognizing the human costs of the state’s security measures. As the *AKP* government and mainstream media revived the perennial ‘separatist/terrorist threat’ narrative, a majority of the Turkish populations opted for the security of the state over its citizens coded as the enemy of the state.

The backlash against *HDP*’s surprising post-*Gezi* success also included a sweeping defamation and criminalization campaign. Since 2016, over ten thousand *HDP* members, including the party’s former cochair and many MPs, have been imprisoned, with some six thousand members still incarcerated.<sup>693</sup> The lack of broad public interest in the issue notwithstanding, *AKP*’s assaults have not been completely erased. In 2016, a large number of academics signed a “peace petition,” condemning the military operations in the region for their unprecedented destruction of civilian life. Since then, many have been prosecuted for spreading “terrorist propaganda,” fired from their academic jobs and prevented from finding new ones.<sup>694</sup> Despite internal repression, the petition has brought into being new mobilizations, coalitions, and strategies: adopting the participatory and spatial strategies of *Gezi*, dismissed “academics for peace,” as they call themselves, have formed “street academies”<sup>695</sup> and ‘Campus-less’ movements (*Kampüssüzler*), repurposing urban parks as classrooms for public lectures “open to scholars and nonscholars both within and outside the academy.”<sup>696</sup>

With novel, creative, and resistant strategies, these academic networks of solidarity have sought, on the one hand, to generate public awareness around academic freedom and demands for nonviolence and social justice. On the other hand, they have also sought to “transport academic knowledge to spaces outside the university campus” and to practice participatory, dynamic, and

inclusive pedagogies.<sup>697</sup> During the two-year emergency rule that followed the 2016 failed coup attempt, about ten noninstitutional solidarity academies were formed in major cities of Turkey from west to east. Engaging collaborative work and offering online courses and regular workshops, these academies forge “knowledge production” with “peace, nonviolence, and justice in the sociopolitical sphere” and address a wide range of issues from militarism, nationalism, and authoritarianism to commodification, exclusion, and precarity at institutions of higher education.<sup>698</sup> Mobilizational politics thus continue to shape and be shaped by transformative pedagogies in extra/institutional spaces of resistance.

In the meantime, as we saw in the second chapter, the *AKP* regime, relying increasingly on criminalizing dissent since *Gezi*, and more explicitly since 2015, has evolved into what political scientists call “competitive authoritarianism.”<sup>699</sup> More than a mere taxonomy, the concept, I contend, hints at an operative mechanism: the more competitive, the more authoritarian. Turkish politics devolved into authoritarianism *because* it was, or could become, competitive. The democratic backsliding cannot be thought apart from *Gezi* and the aftermath of *Gezi*. While the affective structures of post-*Gezi* electoral disillusion and post-2015 political dismay may appear understandable against the backdrop of *AKP*’s rampant authoritarianization, we should also consider that memories of the mobilization harbor resources on which political actors can draw in their new coalitions and struggles. Memory as pedagogy should be distinguished from memory as melancholic attachment or homage to a redemptive past. Rather than longing for (another) *Gezi*, dissent needs to ask and, in some respects, is asking ‘how to *proliferate Gezi*,’ with old and new critiques, desires, and pursuits, extending *Gezi*’s pedagogies into the future for new uses.

My second example takes us back to the early days of the occupation at the *Gezi* Park. The night of June 5, 2013 was *Miraç Kandili* (*Lailat al Miraj*) one of the “blessed nights,” *kandil*

*gecesi*, in Islam, for which protestors distributed *kandil simidi*, a sesame-covered pastry, specific to the holiday, to people arriving at the park throughout the day. A group of practicing protestors, self-identified as “anti-capitalist Muslims,” planned to welcome the night with prayers and Quran reading. As *kandil* approached, many others spent the day in long discussions about whether, collectively, to avoid consuming alcohol on that night at the occupation site. The question was less simple than it appears.

As I explained in the third chapter, one of the main sources of the discontent that paved the way to *Gezi* was the government’s paternal interference in citizens’ lives, which included restraining alcohol sales. Just a week before the *Gezi* Protests erupted, the government had voted, without any public consultation, to ban the sale of alcohol in shops between 10pm and 6am, as well as the sponsorship of events by liquor companies, and any consumption of alcohol within 100m of mosques. In his defense of the new restrictions on alcohol use and sales, Erdoğan sparked a public controversy by disparaging the previous law as “made by two drunkards” and asking, “why a law that is commanded by religion would be rejected.”<sup>700</sup> The phrase “two drunkards” could be a figure of speech or a more specific reference to the two founding figures of the Turkish Republic. Either way, Erdoğan’s anti-secular justification of alcohol restriction—“religion commands what is right”—was an add-on to accumulating reasons that had compelled people to take to the streets. Given that the government’s increased control over alcohol consumption was motivated by an ‘anti-secular’ conservatism, it was ironic, if not discomforting, for the *Gezi* protestors to consider a call for alcohol abstinence.

This, however, was only half the story. The other half had to do with, on the one hand, observing protestors’ demands for respect and recognition of their values, and, on the other, a strategic precaution against the government’s portrayal of all protestors as profane and insolent.

Indeed, at the time, *AKP* members were entertaining a variety of unfounded allegations about the *Gezi* protestors to delegitimize the mobilization in the public eye. Often magnified by surreal details and tapping into religious sentiments in society, these allegations claimed that protesting groups had been disrespecting religion by entering mosques with shoes and alcoholic drinks; or that another group of protestors, ‘shirtless, wearing black durags and leather gloves,’ were seen attacking a ‘headscarf-wearing innocent woman.’<sup>701</sup> Against the backdrop of these kinds of conspiracy theories produced by the state and popularized by media, and at the end of a day-long collective deliberation, protestors settled on “not consuming” alcohol during *kandil*.

The abstinence, in my understanding, was partly to show respect for the religious sensibilities of pious protestors at the Park and partly a strategic preemptive self-defense against the government’s inflammatory defamation campaign. Neither a pure idealistic ethical orientation nor a principled decision, such pragmatic and practical commitments were, in my view, the most forceful motives sustaining a heterogenous social fabric at the occupation site. Adhering to what Danielle Allen calls the “pragmatics of citizenship,” the *Gezi* protestors, in this case, were not oriented to a higher ideal of consensus or unanimity.<sup>702</sup> Instead, they were committed to listening to one another and making strategic and practical decisions from within the constraints of their non-ideal—that is, real—circumstances. The collective decision to abstain from drinking during *kandil* helped build trust and cooperation among practicing and non-practicing citizens—civic bonds that had long been attenuated under the official secularist state ideology that associated religious practice with “the dogmatism of the Middle Ages,” in the Constitutional Court’s wording, before *AKP*’s Islamist conservative governance turned the tide to suppress secularism.<sup>703</sup>

To this day, protestors who participated in the long *kandil* debate cannot decide whether it was their strategic calculations or a pluralist ethos that secured the communal enterprise of *Gezi*.

To me, the truth lies somewhere in between. To navigate the constraints they were facing, protestors simultaneously developed habits of reciprocal learning and understanding, communication and negotiation. As Çiğdem Çıdam poignantly argues, it was these habitual practices—practices of deliberation (“deliberating about what was in their interests”), judgement (“making distinctions and evaluating possibilities”), and understanding (to “think strategically, pursue their interests, and communicate and negotiate their feelings”)—that constituted a shared political association among protestors.<sup>704</sup>

Protestors, with different backgrounds, worldviews, and interests, through deliberation, judgement, and understanding developed trust towards one another. Such trust was motivated less by *a priori* democratic or ethical principles than the practical necessities of their shared reality. Similarly, when socialist groups created a corporeal buffer between police and anti-capitalist Muslims during Friday prayers, every protestor at Taksim Square knew that this image of bodily alliance *would look good* in the media. The idea of that image was attractive. And the greater affective glamour such moments and images generated, the more prevalent they became. The more prevalent they became, the stronger was the emergent trust, cooperation, and reciprocity across formerly distrustful and distant groups. Blurring the lines between strategic thinking and principled action in conventional senses, this positive feedback loop indicates a reciprocity between strategy and principle. It also indicates a mutually reinforcing process of production of space, *Gezi* as a site of plurality, engagement, and trust, *and* production of subjectivities—the *Gezi* protestors as pluralist, engaging, and trustful.

When unpacking dialogical pedagogies, Freire suggests that the “object of investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the

world, in which their generative themes are found.”<sup>705</sup> Freire calls the complex of these generative themes people’s “thematic universe” or “meaningful thematics.”<sup>706</sup> As I see it, at stake in the emergent trust between practicing and non-practicing participants at *Gezi* is a change in their thematic universes in Freire’s sense, as both resist capture by the statist thought-language configuring the terrain of perception and sentiment when it comes to religion/secularism cast in mutually exclusive binary terms.

This preconstructed binary inherited from the early years of the Republic, like other preconstructed binaries discussed throughout this dissertation, leaves political agents with sets of false alternatives within which the disparaged and the privileged take turns. Rethinking and strategizing with respect to the *AKP*’s instrumental use of the binary to demonize dissidents, the *kandil*/alcohol debate was the kind of ‘affirming work’ that was able to disinvest from preexisting matrixes of perception and sentiment and reinvest in another sociality unbounded by statist imaginaries and vocabularies. Seen in this way, the deliberative process of making a new sociality was appositional, more than oppositional, manifesting the protestors’ transferential desire to a space of their own creation—one defined not by inherited political reflexes but by situated and transformative pedagogies. Not motivated by simple idealism, protestors were rather openly pragmatic and pragmatically open to steering their differences and discrepancies through negotiation and concession.

These kinds of pragmatic orientations, in my view, make the politics of *Gezi* more rather than less valuable, as they demonstrate how protestors simultaneously attended to the concrete constraints, complexities, and vagaries of their shared experience *and* sought to trace paths out of them. Reciprocity and trust, the *Gezi* experience shows, are neither mere ‘abstract ideals,’ which protestors dutifully and unanimously apply to their actions, nor ‘future ends’ towards which they

resolutely progress. Instead, they are democratic practices that grow out of the ‘concrete’ intricacies of protest (with a multitude of interests, strategies, objectives, and emotions that protestors bring into collective decision-making), emerging through contingent first steps and repeated interactions which manifest a commitment to a ‘present’ form of togetherness—or, using Allen’s words, a “complex, intricate, and differentiated body” that makes a “whole.”<sup>707</sup> These democratic practices, then, also reveal the “medial” constitution of political action, which, the fourth chapter taught us, signifies an activity that is oriented to no end other than its own *praxis*. Neither purely principled nor instrumental, the open and contingent *kandil* debate at *Gezi* exposes the penumbra of will and necessity, reconfiguring a space of impure (in Allen’s words, “imperfect”) democratic ideals and practices.<sup>708</sup>

It is also important to remember, however, that “wholeness” is different than “oneness.”<sup>709</sup> A whole presents a multiplicity that, though integrated, is not reducible to a singular voice or will. The “seeming oneness” of a complex whole is often a result of not perfect agreement or harmony but “habits of domination and acquiescence” which produce invisibility and/or inaudibility, concealing the multiple voices or wills that are considered ‘particularistic’ instead of ‘popular.’<sup>710</sup> In order to both be vigilant about such concealment and draw substantive lessons from intricate materialities of protest, political theorists should let go of investments in the makings of sovereignty and study what is shared between people in the streets: what they demand, promise, forget, or fulfill; whether and how they listen and learn from, challenge, and collaborate with one another; and what their public experimentations with language, politics, and aesthetics look like. These are the questions my chapters sought to investigate by substantiating the idea of a “people” or an “assembly” with concrete political practices in the streets, parks, and squares during the *Gezi* Protests.

While what I have called ‘nonperformative citations’ are instrumental to the politics of sovereignty, the pedagogical lessons I draw in this conclusion and throughout this dissertation tell a different story, or perhaps tell the same story in a different way. Instead of assigning a sovereign claim and entitlement to a part of the population mobilized out of doors, these lessons prioritize difference over unity; inquiry over hegemony; confusion and surprise over harmony and remedy. In doing so, they attend to the multiplicity of wills and intentions, and the creative navigation of discords that might arise from such multiplicity, rather than perceiving them as inconveniences to be endured or overcome. These lessons also help theorize protest, not through the lens of sovereignty, which operates by the principle of possession and appropriation, but through an economy of desire that neither appropriates nor is appropriable.

Learning from and thinking with *Gezi*, I thus reconstructed ‘the people’ brought into being by the *Gezi* Resistance as an ‘inappropriable people,’ whose political significance and meaning exceed the normative, instrumental, and possessive coordinates of the statist framework. *Gezi*’s collective desire, as I sought to show across my chapters, was constituted by creative refusals, experiments in political thinking, speech, and action, affective and aesthetic investments in collectivity, corporeal solidarities, and dialogic encounters. In all these registers, I articulated forms of political theory and practice that refuse, and seek to render inoperative, state-thought as the dominant form of intelligibility, perception, and apprehension. This refusal, as we now know, is not articulable in terms of parameters of acceptance and rejection. Instead, it questions the question, unsettles the options on offer, and circumvents what it perceives as false and/or non-affirming alternatives. The politics of refusal I theorized with *Gezi*, therefore, has an affirming and reconfigurative power to inaugurate new possibilities for politics.



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## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> “Erdal’a örgüt aranıyor” [In search of an affiliation for Erdal], *Cumhuriyet*, August 16, 2013, available at: <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdala-orgut-araniyor-440002>.

<sup>2</sup> FIDH, Human Rights Association (IHD) and the Human rights foundation of Turkey (HRFT) Report: “Turkey: Gezi, one year on. Witch hunt, impunity of law enforcement officials and a shrinking space for rights and freedoms,” May 2014, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Between 2017 and 2019, at least sixteen human rights defenders were arrested and/or charged for “having attempted to overthrow the government by force and violence.” Among these defendants, businessperson and philanthropist Osman Kavala, the only arrested defendant of the case, is charged with both a violation of the Constitution (Article 309 of the Criminal Code) in connection with the “2016 coup attempt” and charges of offences against the government (Article 312 of the Criminal Code) in connection with the “Gezi Protests.” The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) announced its ruling on the individual application of Kavala in December 2019. The European Court has unanimously ruled that there had been a violation of Article 5/1 (right to liberty and security) of the European Convention on Human Rights, and a violation of Article 5/4 (right to a speedy decision on the lawfulness of detention) of the Convention. In the meantime, the “prosecutor of the Gezi Trial has requested an aggravated life sentence for three defendants, Kavala, Mücella Yapıcı and Yiğit Aksakoğlu,” and “15 to 20 years of prison term for six defendants, who have been charged with ‘attempting to overthrow the government of the Republic of Turkey or prevent it from performing its duties by using force’: Çiğdem Mater Utku, Ali Hakan Altınay, Mine Özerden, Şerafettin Can Atalay, Tayfun Kahraman and Yiğit Ali Ekmekçi.” Eight other defendants, Can Dündar, Mehmet Ali Alabora, Ayşe Pınar Alabora, Gökçe Tüylüoğlu, Handan Meltem Arıkan, Hanzade Hikmet Germiyanoglu and İnanç Ekmekçi, are currently living abroad. Their cases have first been separated and then merged again with the main trial. In 2020, the court board acquitted Kavala and eight other defendants of all charges in the Gezi trial while lifting arrest warrants against the defendants living abroad. However, the appeals court quickly overturned the acquittal of all nine defendants and sent the case back to the lower court. Kavala has been behind bars since October 2017. For an expansive account of the Gezi trial and Turkish criminal legal system, see, International Commission of Jurists “The Gezi Park Case: A Trial Monitoring Report,” 2020, available at: <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Turkey-GeziParkTrial-TrialObservation-Publications-Reports-2020-ENG.pdf>. See also, Gezi trial: Appeals court overturns acquittal of nine defendants, including Kavala, *Bianet*, January 22, 2021 at: <https://bianet.org/english/human-rights/238015-Gezi-trial-appeals-court-overturns-acquittal-of-nine-defendants-including-kavala>.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International Report 2020/21, “Turkey 2020,” April 7, 2021, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/>. As the international organization has also stressed in its previous public statements, “Article 7/2 of Turkey’s Anti-Terrorism Law, which prohibits ‘making propaganda for a terrorist organization,’ is vague and overly-broad, with no explicit requirement for propaganda to advocate violent criminal methods. It has been used repeatedly to prosecute the expression of non-violent opinions.” Amnesty International, “Turkey: First academic to go to prison for signing peace petition in a flagrant breach of freedom of expression,” April 30, 2019, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4402902019ENGLISH.pdf>. On suppression of freedom of expression and the press, see also the Human Rights Watch Report, “Silencing Turkey’s Media The Government’s Deepening Assault on Critical Journalism,” December 15, 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/12/15/silencing-turkeys-media/governments-deepening-assault-critical-journalism>.

<sup>5</sup> See, “Journalism is not a crime: Crackdown on media freedom in Turkey,” *Amnesty International*, May 3, 2017, p. 2, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4460552017ENGLISH.PDF>: “In 2016, the Committee to Protect Journalists described Turkey as the biggest jailer of journalists in the world. Yet despite clear evidence to the contrary, the government continues to claim that there are no journalists in prison in Turkey for their journalistic work.” Quoted here is also President Erdoğan speaking to members of the Anatolia Publishers Association about imprisoned journalists on 22 March 2017: “We asked for the list...It’s

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very interesting. There is everyone on that list, from murderers to thieves, from child abusers to con men. The only people missing from the list are journalists.”

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of law: the ‘mystical foundation of authority,’” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Duricilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67, pp. 42; 52.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests: brutal denial of the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey,” October 2, 2013: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/Gezi-park-protests-brutal-denial-of-the-right-to-peaceful-assembly-in-turkey/>

<sup>8</sup> According to official records, “since the failed coup attempt of July 2016, more than 6,000 academics have been summarily dismissed from their university posts via emergency decrees, many of them accused by citizen-spy ‘secret informers’ (gizli tanık) of associating with terrorists, and banned from public service for life.” Seckin Sertdemir Ozdemir, “Civic death as a mechanism of retributive punishment: academic purges in Turkey,” *Punishment and Society* (2020): 1-19. A 2018 Justice Ministry report also indicated that there were at the time 70,000 students in prisons across the country. See “70,000 students behind bars in Turkey,” *Stockholm Center for Freedom*, April 10, 2018, at: <https://stockholmcfr.org/70000-students-behind-bars-in-turkey/>. Since January 2021, hundreds of students have been placed under possible crime investigations following the protests at Bogazici University against the appointment of an *AKP* party loyalist as the university’s new rector. See, the Human Rights Watch Report “Turkey: student protesters at risk of prosecution,” February 18, 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/turkey-student-protesters-risk-prosecution>.

<sup>9</sup> According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, “under the state of emergency that followed the July 2016 attempted coup, the Erdoğan government introduced amendments to the Municipalities Law, and took direct control of 94 HDP [left-leaning pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party] municipalities and removed mayors and councils who had won at the polls in 2014 local elections. Those mayors detained in 2016-17 have also been subjected to politically motivated prosecutions.” Dismissals and detention of Kurdish mayors from the HDP rapidly increased after the 2019 municipal elections and the state’s military incursion into northeast Syria to remove Syrian Kurdish forces and administration controlling the area. 32 HDP mayors since then have been stripped of their office and replaced with Ankara-appointed provincial and district governor “trustees.” The mayors remain in pretrial detention on allegations of terrorist offenses. See, the HRW Report on mayors’ removal and detention: “Turkey: Kurdish Mayors’ Removal Violates Voters’ Rights,” February 7, 2020 available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights>. The crackdown on the HDP and local municipalities is not limited with the mayoral removals. In one estimate, up to the end of 2020, about 16,000 party members have been arrested or detained, many under the state-of-emergency conditions declared after the failed 2016 coup: “Turkey: the rise and fall of the Kurdish party that threatened Erdoğan,” *The Guardian*, December 27, 2020 available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/27/as-erdogan-tightens-grip-on-power-last-opposition-politicians-resist-brutal-purge>. According to an esteemed news agency, Mesopotamia, by 2018, almost one in three members of the HDP have been detained since the ceasefire between Kurdish militants and the Turkish state collapsed in July 2015. 11,631 of the 37,551 members of the party have been detained while 3,382 have been formally arrested by a court in that time. These numbers include “43 HDP provincial co-chairs and 101 HDP district co-chairs, as well as former co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, who remain in jail facing hundreds of years’ worth of terror charges”: see, “One in three HDP members detained over last 3 years,” *Ahval*, March 10, 2018, available at: <https://ahvalnews.com/hdp/one-three-hdp-members-detained-over-last-3-years>.

<sup>10</sup> Holding a global record, according to International Press Institute (IPI), Turkey keeps more than 120 journalists behind bars on terrorism-related charges. “More than 120 journalists still jailed in Turkey: International Press Institute,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-media/more-than-120-journalists-still-jailed-in-turkey-international-press-institute-idUSKBN1XT26T>. For other governmental strategies to control media, including “misuse of state regulatory bodies, including the Radio and Television High Council (RTÜK) and the Press Advertising Authority (BİK), to punish and financially cripple independent media” and new laws that ensure greater censorship on social media, see the Human Rights Watch Report “Turkey: Press Freedom Under Attack,” October 14, 2020, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/turkey-press-freedom-under-attack>.

<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of 2016 attempted coup, more than 100,000 public sector employees have been dismissed by waves of decrees. This number includes members of the armed forces, police officers, teachers, doctors,

academics and people working at all levels of central and local government. While the “main target of the purge is people perceived to be followers of Fethullah Gülen,” as Amnesty International stresses, “it is clear that a much wider group of people have been targeted” with “arbitrary” claims. “No end in sight: purged public sector workers denied a future in Turkey,” *Amnesty International*, 2017, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4462722017ENGLISH.PDF>

<sup>12</sup> “Turkey puts 18+ age restriction on LGBT+ pride, rainbow-themed merchandise,” *Duvar*, December 9, 2020, available at: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-puts-18-age-restriction-on-lgbt-pride-rainbow-themed-merchandise-news-55401>; and, “Turkey detains students and supporters over LGBTQ flags,” *PBS*, March 26, 2021, accessed at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/turkey-detains-students-and-supporters-over-lgbtq-flags>.

<sup>13</sup> “‘Kiss protest’ held at Turkey subway station,” *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2013, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/5/25/kiss-protest-held-at-turkey-subway-station>

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: crackdown on social media posts,” March 27, 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/27/turkey-crackdown-social-media-posts>

<sup>15</sup> “Behind bars for wearing a keffiyeh” *Bianet*, September 6, 2011, accessed at: <https://m.bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/132528-behind-bars-for-wearing-a-keffiyeh>.

<sup>16</sup> “Erdoğan, Bahçeli target Boğaziçi students, LGBTI+s again as protests intensify,” *Bianet*, February 3, 2021, available at: <https://m.bianet.org/english/politics/238678-Erdoğan-bahceli-target-bogazici-students-lgbti-s-again-as-protests-intensify>.

<sup>17</sup> “Erdoğan says will not let Turkish university protests swell,” *Reuters*, February 3, 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-security-bogazici-int/Erdoğan-says-will-not-let-turkish-university-protests-swell-idUSKBN2A30SX>

<sup>18</sup> Esra Özyürek, Gaye Özpınar, and Emrah Altındış eds., *Authoritarianism and Resistance in Turkey: Conversations on Democratic and Social Challenges* (Cham: Springer, 2019); for Turkey’s historically “alleged internal enemies,” see also Deniz Yonucu, “The absent present law: an ethnographic study of legal violence in Turkey,” *Social & Legal Studies* 27, no.6 (2018): 716–733.

<sup>19</sup> For a thoughtful account of *Gezi*’s “body politics” that resists to being appropriated by state apparatuses, see also Zeynep Gambetti, “Occupy *Gezi* as Politics of Body,” in Umut Özkırımlı ed., *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #occupyGezi* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), pp. 89-102..

<sup>20</sup> Banu Bargu, “Year one: reflections on Turkey’s Second Founding and the Politics of Division,” *Critical Times* 1, no. 1 (2018): 23-48, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> For such desire and togetherness, see also Çigdem Çidam, “Democratic action, spontaneity, and the mediating practices of political friendship,” in *In the Street: Democratic Action, Theatricality, and Political Friendship*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 7-38; and Bülent Eken, “The politics of the *Gezi* Park Resistance: against memory and identity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (2014): 427-36; and Zafer Yılmaz, “Revising the culture of political protest after the *Gezi* Uprising in Turkey: radical imagination, affirmative resistance, and the new politics of desire and dignity,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 29, no.3 (2018): 55-77.

<sup>22</sup> As I will unpack this in Chapter 2, here an important interlocutor is Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> I borrow the notion “mediating practices” from Çigdem Çidam, *In the Street*.

<sup>24</sup> See author Meltem Arian’s account of the night here: “What had happened to turn all this into a war zone?” *Index on Censorship*, January 22, 2014, available at: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/01/meltem-arikan-mi-minor-Gezi-park-Gezi-park-mi-minor/>

<sup>25</sup> There are many sources providing a timeline of the events. See, for example, Amnesty International, “*Gezi* Park Protests,” pp. 54–58; Alexei Anisin, “Repression, spontaneity, and collective action: the 2013 Turkish *Gezi* protests,” *Journal of Civil Society* 12, no.4 (2016): 411-429.

<sup>26</sup> For mobilizations preceding *Gezi*, see Cihan Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 249; Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış, “Introduction” in Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış eds., *‘Everywhere Taksim’: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 29-43, p. 17; Erdem Yörük and Murat Yüksel, “Class and politics in Turkey’s *Gezi* Protest,” *New Left Review* 89 (2014): 103-23, p. 121.

- <sup>27</sup> The best way to describe *AKP*-brand developmentalism is “bulldozer neoliberalism” as coined in John Lovering, and Hade Turkmen, “Bulldozer neoliberalism in Istanbul: the state-led construction of property markets, and the displacement of the urban poor,” *International Planning Studies* 16, no.1 (2011): 73-96.
- <sup>28</sup> Asli Igsiz, “Brand Turkey and the *Gezi* Protests: authoritarianism in flux, law and neoliberalism,” in *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey*, 25-49, p. 39, fn.2. For more on authoritarianization, see also, Berk Esen and Sebnem Gümüşçü, “Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606; Murat Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s democratic breakdown: old *versus* new and indigenous versus global authoritarianism,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 481–503; and Hakkı Taş, “Turkey: from tutelary to delegative democracy,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2015): 776–91.
- <sup>29</sup> “Is Turkey’s secular system in danger?” *BBC*, October 24, 2012, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20028295>
- <sup>30</sup> Erdoğan at the Fifth International Parliamentarians’ Conference on the Implementation of the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) Programme of Action proclaimed: “I see abortion as murder... There is no difference between killing the child in mother’s womb and killing her after the birth.” See “abortion chronicles” in Didem Unal and Dilek Cindoglu, “Reproductive citizenship in Turkey: abortion chronicles,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 38 (2013): 21-31, p. 22.
- <sup>31</sup> “*Gezi* Park: Turkey’s new opposition movement,” *BBC*, August 26, 2013, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23795857>.
- <sup>32</sup> See fn. 14. See also Çiğdem Çıdam, “Unruly practices: *Gezi* Protests and the politics of friendship,” *New Political Science* 39, no.3 (2017): 369-392, p. 385.
- <sup>33</sup> “‘Woman in red’ sprayed with teargas becomes symbol of Turkey protests,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2013, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/05/woman-in-red-turkey-protests>.
- <sup>34</sup> Amnesty International, “*Gezi* Park Protests. See also, Amnesty International, “Adding Injustice to Injury,” June 4, 2014, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2014/06/adding-injustice-injury-one-year-after-gezi-park-protests/>.
- <sup>35</sup> See renowned author Elif Şafak’s commentary, “The view from Taksim Square: why is Turkey now in turmoil?” *The Guardian*, June 3, 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/taksim-square-istanbul-turkey-protest>.
- <sup>36</sup> “Turkey protests: unrest rages in Istanbul and Ankara,” *BBC*, June 1, 2013, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22739423>.
- <sup>37</sup> “Turkish protest takes root in Istanbul square after security forces withdraw,” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/01/turkey-istanbul-erdogan-demo-protests>.
- <sup>38</sup> In the commune, money did not circulate; food, drink, and medicines were shared collectively. See also, Yörük and Yüksel, “Class and politics in Turkey’s *Gezi* Protest,” p. 105.
- <sup>39</sup> As Başak Ertür reports, during *Gezi* “one could spot graffiti that read ‘Taksim will become Tahrir,’ while ‘Syriza’ was spray-painted over the gates of the Greek Consulate. When Brazil erupted, a few days into the Istanbul occupation, Brazilian flags appeared here and there in immediate solidarity.” Başak Ertür, “The *Gezi* uprisings and particularities of discontent,” *Law and Critique* 25, no.1 (2014): 1-13, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> Among others, see Mahiye Seçil Dağtaş, “‘Down with some things!’ The politics of humour and humour as politics in Turkey’s *Gezi* Protests,” *Etnofoor* 28, no. 1 (2016): 11-34; Altug Yalçıntaş, *Creativity and Humour in Occupy Movements* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); Lerna K. Yanık, “Humour as resistance? A brief analysis of the *Gezi* Park protest graffiti,” in ‘*Everywhere Taksim*’; and Serhat Karakayalı and Ozge Yaka, “Humor, revolt, and subjectivity” in Andreas Oberprantacher and Andrei Siclodi eds., *Subjectivation in Political Theory and Contemporary Practices* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp. 203-218; Yeşim Kaptan, “Laugh and resist! Humor and satire use in the *Gezi* Resistance Movement,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 15 (2016): 567-587; and Oya Morva, “The humorous language of street dissent: A discourse analysis of the graffiti of the *Gezi* Park protests,” *The European Journal of Humour Research* 4, no.2 (2016): 19–34.
- <sup>41</sup> Within the growing body of literature in political theory that focuses on protest movements, I am particularly interested in accounts that treat protest as a ‘hegemonic contestation’ among competing claims to peoplehood; and/or construe protestors as embodiments of popular sovereignty and as a constituent power. Most influential among these accounts include Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso,

2018); *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and *Declaration* (New York: Argo-Navis, 2012); Etienne Balibar, *Citizenship* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2016); Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); and Andreas Kalyvas, "Popular sovereignty, democracy, and the constituent power," *Constellations* 12, no. 2 (2005): 223–44.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*; *Declarations*; Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 118-126; Simon Tormey, *The end of representative politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); and Isabel Lorey, "The 2011 Occupy movements: Rancière and the crisis of democracy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31 (2014): 43–65.

<sup>43</sup> Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy From Greece To Occupy* (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed and Islam El Azzazi, "The Egyptian Revolution: a participant's account from Tahrir Square, January and February 2011," *Anthropology Today* 27, no.2 (2011): 22-27, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]" *Grey Room* 39, *Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art* (Spring 2010): 11-38, p. 34-35, fn. 19: "[...] mass reproduction is especially suited to the reproduction of the masses. In great ceremonial processions, giant rallies and mass sporting events, and in war, all of which are now fed into the recording apparatus, the masses come face to face with themselves. [...] mass movements are more clearly apprehended by the camera than by the eye. A bird's-eye view best captures assemblies of hundreds of thousands. And even when this perspective is no less accessible to the human eye than to the camera, the image formed by the eye cannot be enlarged in the same way as a photograph. This is to say that mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behavior especially suited to the apparatus."

<sup>46</sup> David Graeber, *The democracy project: A history, a crisis, a movement*, (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 162.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 163; 169.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>50</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy in Europe: The challenge of right-wing populism," *Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona*, 2007, available at: [http://www.cccb.org/rsc\\_gene/mouffe.pdf](http://www.cccb.org/rsc_gene/mouffe.pdf); also, Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

<sup>51</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* pp. 6; 24; 63.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 153.

<sup>53</sup> Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış, "Introduction," in Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış eds., *'Everywhere is Taksim'*, p. 21; emphasis mine.

<sup>54</sup> Güneş Koç, "A radical-democratic reading of the Gezi Resistance and the Occupy Gezi Movement," in Güneş Koç and Harun Aksu eds., *Another Brick in the Barricade: The Gezi Resistance and its Aftermath* (Bremen: Wiener, 2015), 164-88, p. 173.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> Other examples include Serhat Karakayalı and Özge Yaka, "The Spirit of Gezi: the recomposition of political subjectivities in Turkey," *New Formations* 83 (Winter 2014): 117 – 38; İrem İnceoğlu, "The Gezi Resistance and its aftermath: a radical democratic shift?" *Soundings* 57, no. 1 (2014): 23–34; Güneş Koç and Harun Aksu "Introduction," in *Another Brick in the Barricade*, pp. 7-14; Lorenzo D'Orsi, "Crossing Boundaries and Reinventing Futures: An ethnography of practices of dissent in Gezi Park," in *Another Brick in the Barricade*, pp. 16-34; Onur Bakiner, "Can the 'Spirit of Gezi' transform progressive politics in Turkey?" in *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey*, pp. 65-76; Donatella della Porta and Kivanc Atak; "The spirit of Gezi: A relational approach to eventful protest and its challenges," in Donatella Della Porta ed., *Global diffusion of protest: riding the protest wave in the neoliberal crisis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), pp. 31-58. I will return to some of the accounts here more in depth in the first chapter.

<sup>58</sup> Aysem Mert, "The trees in Gezi Park: environmental policy as the focus of democratic protests," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 21, no.5 (2019): 593-607; Güneş Koç, "A radical-democratic reading of the Gezi Resistance," pp. 164-188; Donatella della Porta and Kivanc Atak; "The spirit of Gezi"; Özden Melis Uluğ

and Yasemin Gülsüm Acar, “‘We are more than alliances between groups,’” in *‘Everywhere is Taksim’*, pp. 121-135.

<sup>59</sup> Gambetti, “Occupy *Gezi* as politics of the body,” p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted here is Ayşem Mert, “The trees in *Gezi* Park,” p. 595. See also, Gambetti, “Occupy *Gezi* as politics of the body,” pp. 94-95.

<sup>61</sup> Hayriye Özen, “An unfinished grassroots populism: the *Gezi* Park Protests in Turkey and their aftermath,” *South European Society and Politics* 20, no.4 (2015): 533-552, p. 543.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Judith Butler, “Foreword,” in *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey*, pp. xii; xi.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 502.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Kevin Olson, *Imagined Sovereignties: The Power of the People and Other Myths of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 115.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Erdoğan’s first reaction to the *Gezi* Protests: “I claim that a government that has received the vote of the majority can do whatever they want. We have never accepted that the minority impose its will on the majority. We will not accept this in the future either” at *Radikal*, June 1, 2013, available at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/basbakan-Erdogan-polis-dun-oradaydi-bugun-de-olacak-yarin-da-1135861/>

<sup>68</sup> Wendy Brown, “At the edge,” *Political Theory* 30, no.4 (2002): 556–576, p. 574.

<sup>69</sup> Marianne Maeckelbergh, “The prefigurative turn: the time and place of social movement practice,” in Ana Cecilia Dinerstein ed., *Social Sciences for an Other Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 121-134; Mathijs Van de Sande, “The prefigurative politics of Tahrir Square—an alternative perspective on the 2011 Revolutions,” *Res Publica* 19 (2013): 223–239; Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*; Luke Yates, “Rethinking prefiguration: alternatives, micropolitics, and goals in social movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no.1 (2014): 1-21.

<sup>70</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image, space, revolution: the arts of occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 8-32, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, p. 502.

<sup>73</sup> Zach Beauchamp, “It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary,” *Vox*, September 13, 2018, available at: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>.

<sup>74</sup> The distinction is employed in a number of accounts: Francisco Panizza, “Neopopulism and its limits in Collor’s Brazil,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19, no.2 (2000): 177–92, p. 190; (as in populism as movement versus populism in power) Nadia Urbinati, “Political theory of populism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 111-127, p. 112; Harcourt *Critique and Praxis*, p. 363; Benjamin Arditi, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> For a different, but powerful understanding of “surplus” of *Gezi*, as an “excess of meaning, praxis, and publicness that exceeds the individuals who participated in the events,” see Zeynep Gambetti, “The *Gezi* Resistance as Surplus Value” *Jadaliyya* July 5, 2013, available online at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12,672/the-Gezi-resistance-as-surplus-value>. Here Gambetti argues that such surplus is “collectivized” in the sense that it is “produced by ‘nobody;’” for “it is produced by ‘everybody.’”

<sup>76</sup> Julia Tulke, “Achieving dissent: (im)material trajectories of political street art in Istanbul and Athens,” in Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen and Umut Korkut eds., *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 121-39, p. 122.

<sup>77</sup> See also; Attila Aytekin, “A ‘magic and poetic’ moment of dissensus: aesthetics and politics in the June 2013 (*Gezi* Park) Protests in Turkey,” *Space and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017):191-208.

<sup>78</sup> Tijen Tunali, “The art of resistance: carnival aesthetics and the *Gezi* Street Protests,” *ASAP/Journal* 3, no.2 (2018): 377-400, p. 379, emphasis mine.

<sup>79</sup> Lisa Wedeen, “Ideology and humor in dark times: notes from Syria,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no.4 (2013): 841–873, p. 865

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin McKean, “Populism, pluralism, and the ordinary” in Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan eds, *Mapping Populism: Approaches and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 85-95, p.86.

- <sup>81</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- <sup>82</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 53
- <sup>83</sup> I translate “istemezükçüler” as “naysayers,” but for more accurate semiotics, the U.S. audience might read it as “do-nothings,” as both terms carry connotations of certain kind of dissent that is coded stubborn and counter-productive by right-wing discourses. Exemplary of such discourse is “Gezi eylemleriyle Türkiye'nin ilerleyişi karartılıyor,” [Turkey's Progress is Hampered by the Gezi Protests]: <https://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/147382-Gezi-eylemleriyle-turkiye-nin-ilerleyisi-karartiliyor>.
- <sup>84</sup> Lisel Hintz, “Adding insult to injury: vilification as counter-mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests,” in *POMEPS Studies: From Mobilization to Counter-Revolution*, paper presented to the workshop, “From mobilization to counter-revolution: the Arab Spring in comparative perspective,” 3-4 May 2016, at: [https://pomeps.org/2016/06/06/adding-insult-to-injury-vilification-as-counter-mobilization-in-turkeys-Gezi-protests/#\\_ftnref12](https://pomeps.org/2016/06/06/adding-insult-to-injury-vilification-as-counter-mobilization-in-turkeys-Gezi-protests/#_ftnref12).
- <sup>85</sup> Here I am inspired by and borrowing language from a conversation between Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey, “Where Black feminist thought and trans\* feminism meet: a conversation,” *Souls* 19, no.4 (2017): 438-454, p. 439.
- <sup>86</sup> Audre Lorde, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), pp. 110-114.
- <sup>87</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 12
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 11.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 2.
- <sup>91</sup> Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 7.
- <sup>92</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 11.
- <sup>93</sup> Funky000punk, “Keske yalnız bunun için kırsaydım seni / I wish I would break you just because of this,” *YouTube*, June 18, 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPGAV2p6b4E>.
- <sup>94</sup> Erica Weiss, “Refusal as act, refusal as abstention,” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no.3 (2016): 351-358, p. 352.
- <sup>95</sup> Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, p.42.
- <sup>96</sup> Jack Halberstam, “The wild beyond: with and for the undercommons,” in *Undercommons*, p. 8.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>99</sup> Halberstam *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 10; James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 183.
- <sup>100</sup> For a well-rounded review, see Kevin Attell's essay, “Language and labor, silence and stasis: Bartleby among the philosophers” in Jason Frank ed, *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), pp. 104-228.
- <sup>101</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby; or, the formula,” in *Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp. 68; 71-73.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 71.
- <sup>103</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: a critical introduction* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 32.
- <sup>104</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Daniel Heller-Roazen ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 254.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 255.
- <sup>106</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 9. For Aristotle's articulation of dunamis, see Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 35-38; 46-51; and Agamben, “On potentiality,” 179-184; 2014; “What is a destituent power?” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014): 65–74; “Part III. Form-of-life” in *The Use of Bodies*, translated by Adam Kosko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- <sup>107</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 9, 1046e 25-32; 1050b 10; 1047a 24-26.
- <sup>108</sup> Agamben, “What is a destituent power?” p. 70.



<sup>109</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 116-18.

<sup>110</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Hunger of an ox: considerations on the Sabbath, the feast, and inoperativity," in *Nudities*, David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 110-12; *Profanations*, Jeff Fort trans. (New York: Zone, 2007), p. 86; "What is a destituent power?" p. 70.

<sup>111</sup> Barnor Hesse and Juliet Hooker, "On black political thought inside global black protest," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no.3 (2017): 443-456, p. 449.

## Chapter 1: The Gezi Spirit and the problem with sovereign constitutions

<sup>112</sup> Libe Garcia Zarranz and Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand, "Affective assemblages: entanglements and ruptures— an interview with Lauren Berlant," *Atlantis* 38, no.2 (2017): 12-17, p.13.

<sup>113</sup> Carlos de la Torre, "The people, populism, and the leader's semi-embodied power," *Rubrica Contemporanea* 2, no.3 (2013): 1-28, p.18.

<sup>114</sup> In Claude Lefort's description, democracies, absolved from all certainty in articulating social and political order, have as their locus of power an "empty space." Democratic power to rule is grounded in the popular will; however, "the people," lacking any natural determination or substantial identity, remains permanently open to contestation for the representation of its will. In other words, "the principle of popular sovereignty" prescribes the dissociation of power from a specific body and thus makes the seat of representation an empty place that can be occupied by anyone without any permanent guarantee. The empty space designated for "the people," in turn, transforms the collective subject of "the people" into a symbolic entity. The curious fact about democratic rule, however, reveals itself in the institutionalization of this contestation over the empty space, namely the universal suffrage. Acts of voting enable people to actualize themselves by expressing their will, while at the same time rendering them "mere statistics." Elections are essential means of exercising popular sovereignty, but at the same time they replace citizens with statistics. As people exercise their sovereign right to rule, ironically, their "numbers replace substance." Claude Lefort, "On question of democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, David Macey trans. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 17-19.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, the collage poster of iconic protest figures (Lady in Red, Talcid-Man, Standing Man, Rad Hack, and others) named "Yenilmezler," the translated name for the Marvel movie Avengers, though translating more correctly as "Invincibles" or Invictus," available at: <http://www.baskahaber.org/2013/06/Gezi-park-direnisinin-sivrilen.html>. See also Barış Yildirim, "Gezi nerek Sanat: Bir Elim Sanatta Bir Elim Gazda," in Özyay Göztepe ed. *Gezi Direnisi Uzerine Dusunceler* (Ankara: NotaBene, 2013), pp. 265-76.

<sup>116</sup> For a number of analysis, see Irem Inceoglu, "Encountering difference and radical democratic trajectory," *City* 19, no.4 (2015): 534-544, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1051743>; Karayali and Yaka, "The spirit of Gezi," p. 122; Emrah Yildiz, "Alignments of dissent and politics of naming: assembling resistance in Turkey," *Jadaliyya* June 4, 2013, available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28721/Alignments-of-Dissent-and-Politics-of-Naming-Assembling-Resistance-in-Turkey>; Onur Bakiner, "Can the 'Spirit of Gezi' transform progressive politics in Turkey?"; Anthony Allessandrini, Nazan Ustundag, and Emrah Yildiz, eds., *'Resistance Everywhere': The Gezi Protests and Dissident Visions of Turkey*, (Jadmag Pedagogy Publications, 2013); see also, J. F. Walton, "Everyday I'm capulling!"; Ozden Melis Uluğ and Yasemin Gulsum Acar, "We are more than alliances between groups"; Dağhan Irak, "İstanbul United: football fans entering the 'political field,'" in *'Everywhere Taksim'*, pp. 137-51.

<sup>117</sup> As for the globally circulating accounts, I will particularly Judith Butler's account of Gezi. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

<sup>118</sup> A few examples would include Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*; the edited volume, *What is a People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), which includes essays by Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, and Jacques Rancière, among others. For similar diagnostic claims, particularly concerning the prevalence of "constituent power" analyses in contemporary political theory, see also, Andreea Ana-Maria Alexe, "Constituent power – the essence of democracy," *Revista de Stiinte Politice* 47 (2015): 316-325; Travis Holloway, "Neoliberalism and the future of democracy," *Philosophy Today* 62 (2018): 627-50; and, Illan rua Wall, "Notes on an 'open' constituent power," *Law, Culture and Humanities* 11, no.3 (2015): 378-392.

<sup>119</sup> Azzellini, and Sitrin, *They Can't Represent Us*.

<sup>120</sup> Balibar, *Citizenship*, p. 131.

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- <sup>121</sup> Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*, pp. 158-59.
- <sup>122</sup> Judith Butler, "Trump, fascism, and the construction of 'the people': an interview with Judith Butler," *Verso Books*, December 29, 2016, available at: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3025-trump-fascism-and-the-construction-of-the-people-an-interview-with-judith-butler>; emphasis mine.
- <sup>123</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>124</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 180.
- <sup>125</sup> I borrow Anna Terweil's theorization of "problematization," which she develops by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault. Anna Terweil, "What is carceral feminism," *Political Theory* (2019): 421-42, p. 436.
- <sup>126</sup> Inceoglu, "Encountering difference and radical democratic trajectory," p. 535.
- <sup>127</sup> Gunes Koc, "A radical-democratic reading of the Gezi Resistance and the Occupy Gezi Movement," p. 165.
- <sup>128</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 186.
- <sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175
- <sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25. See also, Judith Butler "Rethinking vulnerability and resistance," in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay eds., *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 12-27.
- <sup>131</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 154-55.
- <sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 156.
- <sup>133</sup> See, for example, Andreas Kalyvas, "Constituent power," in *Political Concepts*, available at: <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/constituentpower/>
- <sup>134</sup> Judith Butler, "Rethinking vulnerability and resistance," in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 26.
- <sup>135</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 162.
- <sup>136</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, Samuel Moyn ed., *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 96.
- <sup>137</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 165-69.
- <sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 169.
- <sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.
- <sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.
- <sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.
- <sup>142</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Life is Grievable* (New York: Verso, 2009), p.67.
- <sup>143</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 156.
- <sup>144</sup> Andreas Kalyvas, "Popular sovereignty, democracy, and the constituent power," p. 238.
- <sup>145</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 82.
- <sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.
- <sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 100-102.
- <sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 92; 77.
- <sup>149</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.
- <sup>151</sup> George Shulman, "On vulnerability as Judith Butler's language of politics: From 'Excitable Speech' to 'Precarious Life,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no.1-2 (2011): 227-35, pp. 231-32.
- <sup>152</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 29.
- <sup>153</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 78.
- <sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis mine.
- <sup>155</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20; *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 170.
- <sup>156</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 81, emphasis mine.
- <sup>157</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>158</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 166.
- <sup>159</sup> Emilio Ferrara, "Dynamics of attention and public opinion in social media," in eds. Brook Foucault Welles and Sandra González-Bailón, *The Oxford Handbook of Networked Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 378-97, p. 388.
- <sup>160</sup> For the state of democracy, see, Zafer Yilmaz and Bryan S. Turner, "Turkey's deepening authoritarianism and the fall of electoral democracy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46, no. 5 (2019): 691-698.

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- <sup>161</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 170.
- <sup>162</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 77.
- <sup>163</sup> Butler, “Trump, fascism, and the construction of ‘the people.’”
- <sup>164</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 77.
- <sup>165</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 231; also, 94-97; 105; 111.
- <sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.
- <sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p. 73.
- <sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 71; 139.
- <sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 96; 127.
- <sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.
- <sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.
- <sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.
- <sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.
- <sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.
- <sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.
- <sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70; Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), p. 53: “A certain particular, by making its own particularity the signifying body of a universal representation, comes to occupy—within the system of differences as a whole—a hegemonic role.”
- <sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, p. 162.
- <sup>178</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>179</sup> *Ibid*. See also, Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: what’s in a Name,” in Francisco Panizza ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 32-49, p. 44.
- <sup>180</sup> See also, Benjamin Ardit, “Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason*,” *Constellations* 13, no. 3 (2010): 488-97, p. 495.
- <sup>181</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason* pp. 70; 73-4.
- <sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.
- <sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.
- <sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.
- <sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.
- <sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.
- <sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.
- <sup>188</sup> Jean L. Cohen, “What’s wrong with the normative theory (and the actual practice) of left populism,” *Constellations* 26 (2019): 391-407, p. 393.
- <sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, p. 394.
- <sup>190</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 104.
- <sup>191</sup> Biga Manguashca, “Resisting the ‘populist hype’: a feminist critique of a globalising concept,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no.5 (2019): 768-85, p. 779.
- <sup>192</sup> Eva Ziarek, “Populism—a crux or crisis of politics? Laclau versus Arendt,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 102 (2019): 128-51, p. 140.
- <sup>193</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>194</sup> Benjamin McKean, “Toward an inclusive populism? On the role of race and difference in Laclau’s politics,” *Political Theory* 44, no.6 (2016): 797-820, p. 799.
- <sup>195</sup> Erin Pineda, “Reclaiming populism,” *Boston Review* April 29, 2020, available at: <http://bostonreview.net/forum/reclaiming-populism/erin-r-pineda-another-populism>
- <sup>196</sup> Íñigo Errejón, “Ernesto Laclau, theorist of hegemony,” *Verso Blog*, April 30, 2014, available at: <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1578-ernesto-laclau-theorist-of-hegemony>; and David Howarth, “The success of Syriza in Greece has been driven by Marxism, populism and yes—Essex University,” *The Independent*, January 29, 2015, accessed at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-success-of-syriza-ingreece-has-beendrivenby-marxism-populism-and-yes-essex-university-10010806.html>.
- <sup>197</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 156.
- <sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.
- <sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

- <sup>200</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 225. Laclau describes “populist reason” as “*political reason tout court*”—his emphasis.
- <sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70; 78-80; 224.
- <sup>202</sup> Arditi, “On Ernesto Laclau’s *On Populist Reason*,” p. 489.
- <sup>203</sup> We owe the distinction to Aristotle’s elaboration of virtues and habits: “So too, we become just by doing things that are just, temperate by doing things that are temperate, and courageous by doing things that are courageous. [...] And it is the same way in the case of the virtues, for by acting in our dealings with people some of us become just, others unjust, and by acting in frightening situations and getting habituated to be afraid or to be confident, some of us become courageous and others become cowards.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, 1103b.
- <sup>204</sup> Ziarek, “Populism—a crux or crisis of politics,” p. 135.
- <sup>205</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 77.
- <sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>207</sup> “O fotoğrafın kahramanı konuştu: ezber bozdu” (The protagonist of the photograph speaks: [That photograph] broke frames), *Radikal*, June 4, 2015.
- <sup>208</sup> Karayali and Yaka, “The Spirit of *Gezi*,” p. 128.
- <sup>209</sup> Lorenzo D’Orsi, “Crossing boundaries and reinventing futures,” p. 21.
- <sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>211</sup> Inceoglu, “The *Gezi* Resistance and its aftermath.”
- <sup>212</sup> Ece Canlı and Fatma Umul, “Bodies on the streets: gender resistance and collectivity in the *Gezi* revolts,” *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* 7, no.1 (2015): 19-39, p. 26.
- <sup>213</sup> I draw on Begum Adalet’s critique of romantic archs and conceptualization of tragedy as a form of attentiveness to paradoxes, silences, and omissions of historical narratives. Begum Adalet, “Emplotting development: narratives of land reform in Turkey and the United States,” unpublished manuscript. See also, David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 13.
- <sup>214</sup> See Tanil Bora, “Nationalist discourses in Turkey,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no.2-3 (2003): 433-5; Simten Cosar, “Turkish nationalism and Sunni Islam in the construction of political party identities,” and Mesut Yegen, “Banditry to disloyalty: Turkish nationalisms and the Kurdish Question,” in Fuat Keyman, and Ayse Kadioğlu eds., *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2011), pp. 162-96; 223-52.
- <sup>215</sup> Meral Ugur-Cinar and Cisem Gunduz-Arabaci, “Deliberating in difficult times: lessons from public forums in Turkey in the aftermath of the *Gezi* protests,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2020), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1491294>, 20.
- <sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>218</sup> McKean, “Toward an Inclusive Populism,” 814.
- <sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>220</sup> Oyku Potuoglu-Cook, “Hope with qualms: a feminist analysis of the 2013 *Gezi* protests,” *Feminist Review* 109 (2015): 96-123, p. 96.
- <sup>221</sup> Laclau writes, “[t]his totality is an object which is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because the tension between equivalence and difference is ultimately insurmountable; necessary, because without some kind of closure, however precarious it might be, there would be no signification and no identity.” Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 70.
- <sup>222</sup> Here I borrow language from Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996), p. 2.
- <sup>223</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Freedom and politics: a lecture,” *Chicago Review* 14, no.1 (1960): 28-46, p. 40.
- <sup>224</sup> Hannah Arendt, “What is freedom,” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961 [1954]), p. 164.
- <sup>225</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 234
- <sup>226</sup> Peter Gratton, “Derrida and the limit of sovereignty’s reason: freedom, equality, but not fraternity,” *Telos* 148 (2009): 141-159, p. 142.
- <sup>227</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 76.

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- <sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>229</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 86. See also, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Peggy Kamuf trans. (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 111–12.
- <sup>230</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 76.
- <sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- <sup>232</sup> Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's "Republic"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 17.
- <sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187–88.
- <sup>234</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 44.
- <sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- <sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>237</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 111–12.
- <sup>238</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 33–34.
- <sup>239</sup> Jacques Derrida, “For a justice to come an interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Independent Media Center Belgium*, April 05, 2004, available online at: <http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/brussels.html>.
- <sup>240</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 176.
- <sup>241</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Jacques Derrida: co-responding voix you,” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac eds., *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (London: Duke University Press, 2009), 41–53, pp. 50.
- <sup>242</sup> Oliver Marchart, “In the name of the people: populist reason and the subject of the political,” *Diacritics* 35, no.3 (2015): 3–19, pp. 18.
- <sup>243</sup> Hrag Papazian, “Between Gezi Park and Kamp Armen: the intersectional activism of leftist Armenian youths in Istanbul,” *Turkish Studies* 18, no.1 (2017): 56–76, p. 66.
- <sup>244</sup> Ayse Parla and Ceren Ozgul, “Property, dispossession, and citizenship in Turkey; or, the history of the Gezi uprising starts in the Surp Hagop Armenian Cemetery” *Public Culture* 28, no.3 (2016): 617–653, p. 621.
- <sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 623.
- <sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.
- <sup>248</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 168.
- <sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>250</sup> Hannah C. Appel, “People Before Process: the bureaucracies of anarchy Pt. 2,” *Social Text* (December 14, 2011), available at: [https://socialtextjournal.org/people\\_before\\_process\\_the\\_bureaucracies\\_of\\_anarchy\\_part\\_ii/](https://socialtextjournal.org/people_before_process_the_bureaucracies_of_anarchy_part_ii/)
- <sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>254</sup> Laura Grattan, “Populism, race, and radical imagination: #FeelingTheBurn in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter,” in *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffit eds. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 136–154, p. 136.
- <sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137–38.
- <sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- <sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- <sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- <sup>261</sup> Bargu, “Year one.”

## Chapter 2: Making a people: The Democracy Watches and Gezi-envy

- <sup>262</sup> “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan dismisses Turkey protesters as vandals,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey-protesters-looters-vandals>.

- 263 “Erdoğan: ‘We Will Build Military Barracks in Gezi Whether They Like It or Not’,” *Bianet*, July 19, 2016, <http://bianet.org/english/politics/176887-Erdoğan-we-will-build-military-barracks-in-gezi-whether-they-like-it-or-not>.
- 264 “Our youth were on the front line against July 15 coup attempt,” *Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/77389/our-youth-were-on-the-front-line-against-july-15-coup-attempt>, emphasis mine.
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451 Seçil Dağtaş, “Down with some things,” p. 20.

452 The narrative of complete depoliticization and docility is in fact not entirely accurate, as, even in the post-coup era, many notable public universities have continued to be sites of political activism in lesser intensities. Ali Rıza Taskale, for example, points to the December 2012 student protests at the METU as “the first wave of protests” preparing the ground for Gezi. The METU student protests were “against Erdoğan’s authoritarianism as well as the AKP’s higher education privatization policies and the increasing violations of student and human rights.” See, Ali Rıza Taskale, “There is another Turkey out there,” *Third Text* 30, no. 1-2 (2016): 138-46, p. 140.

453 The narrative of apolitical and apathetic young generations is a common lore in Turkey, while there is yet to be a consensus about the youth’s civic sensibilities among the experts of youth sociology. Vehbi Bayhan’s comparison of the post-1980 generation (apolitical, individualist and consumerist) with the previous generations of 1960s and 70s (political, collectivist and socially sensible) reflects the general perspective on this issue. Vehbi Bayhan, “Türkiye’de Gençlik: Sorunlar, Değerler ve Değişimler,” in Memet Zencirkıran ed. *Türkiye’nin Toplumsal Yapısı* (Ankara: Nova, 2006), pp. 561-84. Supportive of Bayhan, some others, too, frame the “new youth culture” in reference to hedonism, drug addiction, violence, and stolidity. See, for instance, Mahmut Tezcan, “Sosyo-kültürel Değişim Sürecinde Türkiye’deki Gençlik,” in *Türkiye’de ve Avrupa’da Gençlik* (Ankara: Konrad Adenauer Vakfı Yayınları, 2000), pp. 95-104; and Veysel Bozkurt, *Püritanizmden Hedonizme Yeni Çalışma Etiği* (Bursa: Alesta Yayınları, 2000). In an opposing view, Demet Lüküslü strongly criticizes the myth of “an apolitical youth,” “a lost generation,” by asserting that, to the contrary, the youth, in the post-1980 era, has been reflective on social problems while maintaining a passive resistance. Demet Lüküslü, *Türkiye’de “Gençlik Miti”: 1980 Sonrası Türkiye Gençliği*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009.

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461 Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, p. 255.

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467 Leyla Neyzi, "Object or Subject? The Paradox of 'Youth' in Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (2011): 411-32, p. 424.

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#### **Chapter 4: Breaking billboards: protest and a politics of play**

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## Conclusion

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661 Such protectiveness is understandable given how often protestors, at *Gezi* and elsewhere, are criticized for ‘not knowing what they want’ or ‘not proposing a set of agreed-upon demands.’ In a recent interview, Fred Moten articulates the connection between the word “demand,” which, he reminds, “also means ‘to make a claim,’ and sometimes ‘to make a legal claim,’” and the ability to “speak with a kind of authority.” A global kind of common sense assumes that a “properly authorised and authoritative speech of a demand takes the form of a univocal, single speech.” Accordingly, speech is considered to command authority *when* a “sovereign speaker”

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is able to ‘drown out,’ or to summon up within one “anthemic” speech, all “other kinds of speech” and when a clear, univocal and unequivocal, “demand” is articulated. These assumptions and considerations, however, are at odds with on the ground politics, where in fact there are, in Moten’s words, “a whole bunch of people making a whole bunch of demands, some of which are contradictory.” Such polyphonic and “ana(n)themic multiplicity” is often disavowed as it “undermines the “univocal authority of sovereignty.” Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, p. 135.

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