

2014

Pride in Istanbul

Susan C. Pearce

East Carolina University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pearce, Susan C.. 2014. "Pride in Istanbul." *Societies Without Borders* 9 (1): 111-128.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol9/iss1/15>

This Notes from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

Pride in Istanbul
Notes from the Field: Summer 2013

Susan C. Pearce
East Carolina University

Received February 2014; Accepted March 2014

Abstract

In June of 2013, Istanbul, Turkey held its annual Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Pride parade. This year's parade was performed in a particular historical context: in the midst of an anti-government uprising that had begun in Istanbul and spread throughout Turkey. This context loaned a particular flavor to the Pride parade, and there was a reciprocity between the recent protest movement and LGBT activism. These field notes describe the June 2013 parade and its relationship to the socio-political context, drawing from these observations some preliminary conclusions regarding human rights and gender as Turkey interacts with transnational human rights regimes such as the European Union.

In the summer of 2013, the world watched as a small, simple youth protest to save a park in central Istanbul erupted into indignant daily demonstrations numbering in the thousands, spawning citizen sympathy uprisings of an estimated 2.5 million in 79 cities across Turkey. One month after the first protest event in this park, in the midst of the ensuing unrest, Istanbul held its 11th annual Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Pride parade, the country's largest on record. Here, I will describe my impressions of this parade as a participant observer, and contextualize the meaning of this event within the socio-political positions of Turkey and the Western Balkans who are negotiating with the European Union for accession. I argue that this parade is worth scholarly and activist attention due to my modest prediction that the 2013 event could signal a historical turning point in the broader legitimacy of LGBT rights in Turkish culture, among other signs of gradual openings.

Turkey's first legal Pride parade was held in Istanbul in 2003; this may have been the first for any majority Muslim country. The event attracted 30 marchers. Each year subsequently, organizers pushed forward and attendance increased, until the 2011 parade that reached an estimated 10,000. At that point the Istanbul parade was dubbed the largest in East Europe. The following year, those numbers doubled, as the crowd reached approximately 20,000. Following suit, Turkey's capital, Ankara has been the site of International Day Against Homophobia events, a university-based Pride event, and an Iranian Gay Pride parade in recent years.

The background that would eventually lead me to the 2013 Istanbul parade began in 2005, the first summer that I taught an annual summer school orientation course for international graduate student scholarship recipients for the Open Society Institute (now the Open

S. Pearce/Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

Society Foundations) in Istanbul. One of our students was a Turkish LGBT activist with Lambda Istanbul, named Cihan. This student generously shared his experience as an activist on a panel on gender issues in Turkey, organized for fellow students. After completing his graduate studies abroad, he returned to Istanbul and continues his political work with the community to this day. I learned from Cihan and other activists about the challenges facing the movement in Turkey, including homophobia sometimes aggressively manifested through physical attacks and honor crimes—many with impunity. I learned that some of the goals of Western activists, such as gay marriage, were not likely to be on the radar in Turkey for a long time to come. And yet the gay-rights movement was energetic and mobilized.

Returning to Turkey in 2012 to conduct exploratory research on gender-based violence and migration in Southeast Europe, I sat down with Cihan for an update. Among the current scene that Cihan described was the draw that Istanbul had developed as a tourist mecca for LGBT people from across Europe, due to its lively gay club scene—although there are only two lesbian bars to date. He reported relative progress in police understanding, at least in Istanbul, in investigating crimes against LGBT individual. This despite continued reports that I heard from Cihan and other friends of regular street harassment of the LGBT community. Cihan also described a division between LGB and Trans activists, resulting in separate Pride parades. He was disturbed by this division, which was due to trans individuals who felt invisible in the LGBTI movement, and decided to assert their visibility through their own parade. He reported that many were actively attempting to bridge the divide.

As my 2012 research trip drew to a close, I experienced an unexpected moment of cultural hybridity. On my final evening in Istanbul, I happened upon Cihan and a friend strolling down the pedestrian boulevard, Istiklal Caddesi. It was the first night of Ramadan, and he and his friend were on their way to break the fast (*Iftar*) with a group of friends at a lesbian bar; they invited me to join. Although I had to decline the invitation, we shared a laugh about the irony of the event's location, signaling an intersection between two communities that one might expect to be at irreconcilable cultural odds.

In 2013, I returned to Istanbul for my summer teaching in time to join the June 30 LGBT Pride parade. The Gezi Park protests, which had spread to the adjacent Taksim Square, were just over one month old, and had recently suffered violent crackdowns. Although the initial goal was to save a central Istanbul park from getting bulldozed for development, this grew into a larger movement to counter the current government's massive architectural reconstruction of the city to harken to back to the Ottoman era, privileging religious (Islamic) identity through the architecture. More broadly, resisters began to raise questions more

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

assertively about the government's expanding authoritarianism and unilateral decision-making, and the events grew into a broader anti-government movement that drew international media attention. The party in power, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has seen the country through an unprecedented economic growth spurt, but had begun to jail military generals and journalists, among other measures to shore up executive and judicial control. Activists particularly targeted Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the ringmaster and aspirant to an anachronistic Sultan-esque status, many calling for his resignation.

Cihan and fellow LGBT activists had joined these 2013 street demonstrations around Gezi Park with visible presentations of their identities; an "LGBT Blok" was formed at the site. There were reports of gay bashing by the police in the midst of other attacks on protesters. And yet, these daily protests would set the stage for an unprecedented alliance of youth activists across many diverse identities as the days progressed, and may have begun to bridge an LGBT/straight divide. Coincidentally, Pride week had adopted the theme of "Resistance." The Pride week website announced that

For us, resistance is about portraying our own gender performances and subjectivities.

For us, resistance means to stand against the reproductive heterosexual marriages as well as society's 'unique' building block, the family, with the motto 'Love is Solidarity'.

For us, resistance is not to bow before 'biological sex' and the oppressive compulsory heterosexual matrix which is imposed on us since we are little 'children' and whose oppressive and repressive effects intensify as we are forced to become 'students' and 'employees'.

For us, our bedrooms, fantasies and loves constitute resistance.

For us, resistance is the long hours we spend in front of houses bereft of justice, in solidarity with those defenders of rights who are taken into custody one by one by the authorities who take no precautions whatsoever and who enforce no legal sanctions against the murderers of trans and LGBT individuals. ("21st LGBT Pride Week" 2013)

Tensions on Istanbul streets in the midst of the Gezi protests remained high when I arrived in June, and street actions had far from

S. Pearce/Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

subsided. Days prior to this march, I had strolled the streets and watched police confront a growing collection of protesters with tear gas. Defiant, humorous graffiti filled every free space of the neighborhood, but the exuberance and dedication of activists was palpable: I watched crowds of young people excitedly emerge from a subway train to press toward the square as they accompanied themselves with orchestrated applause.

The fourth annual Istanbul Trans parade took place during these weeks (June 23) without major incident. I did not attend, but subsequently learned that this parade became a simultaneous sympathy march for Gezi Park, as chanters shouted the familiar “Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance,” and “We don’t want a transphobic state.” Several parliamentary deputies representing the opposition secularist party, CHP (Republican People’s Party) publicly participated in the march (“Istanbul Trans Parade . . .” 2013). In 2012, this parade drew 500 participants. In contrast, the 2013 event attracted an estimated 10,000. As would be the case with the LGBT parade, organizers found that the Gezi Park movement boosted attendance tremendously. For the first year since its inception, there were no reports of violence against the marchers.

The more general (and larger) LGBT parade was scheduled for June 30, punctuating a full week of Pride events. This year was the 21st year of Pride week in Istanbul—beginning a full 10 years before the first parade. Pride week events included discussions, panels, artistic performances, and a photography workshop to document resistance. Among the panel topics, which brought academics and activists together, were immigration (Turkey is a transit destination for LGBT people who escape Iran, for example) and transphobia in Turkish feminism. The Pride week logo is an abstract, rainbow-colored doodle suggesting the outline of a prominent Istanbul bridge that crosses the Bosphorus: placing the Istanbul stamp on the cause of pride. I describe my parade impressions here. To be clear, I am not fluent in Turkish, though I have begun to learn basics of the language; I depended on my contacts and journalistic reports where translations were needed.

THE 2013 LGBT PARADE

At 5:00 PM on June 30, I arrived at the space designated for the Pride parade’s beginning, Taksim Square, which had also become the epicenter of the anti-government protests, at the appointed time for the parade to start. Marchers waited to file onto the pedestrian boulevard, Istiklal Caddesi—a recognizable protest route for many types of actions, as officials ordinarily allow protest permits on Sunday on this boulevard. The square was crowded with marchers, some drumming and others jubilantly employing noisemakers as the crowds bounced to the rhythms. I turned to see a line of police standing behind us, observing silently but not ominously; conspicuously absent was the riot gear with which they

had been adorned throughout the recent uprisings. This immediately calmed my nerves to some extent, as I was wary of joining a crowd scene at the ongoing Gezi protests. A friend had assured me that police would not attack this group, so I took the chance.

Although time for the parade to begin, there was no sign of movement down toward Istiklal Caddesi for at least one hour. I would later learn that this was not due to delays in the start of the parade but to the massive size of the crowd of marchers. The wait did not seem to dissuade those assembled in the square, who continued their celebratory merry-making. Entertaining the waiting marchers and passersby was a cross-dressed burly man in a white wedding gown with a full puffy skirt, lace veil, tiara, and heavy makeup, who struck campy poses for photos with anyone who asked—and was bombarded with requests. Street-vendor opportunists were on hand, selling products that had become symbol staples in the recent protests, such as Guy Fawkes masks and Turkish flags with the image of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In fact, staring over our shoulders was the banner sporting the proud image of Turkish father himself, hung in its usual place from the top of the Atatürk Cultural Center just across the square. I used my camera to frame his distant image with several foregrounded rainbow flags, bemused and curious about what he would say. I noticed a small group of about 15 or 20 parade marchers at the rear of the crowd carrying red flags behind a large banner, which turned out to be an LGBT socialist contingent.

Cheers erupted when the growing crowd finally began to move; music and drumming picked up, as did the dancing and chanting. Paraders also had whistles that had been distributed by the organizers, further amplifying the noise level. As my section turned the corner onto Istiklal Cadessi, we were finally able to view the expansive mass ahead and feel a part of the whole. I would describe the mood of the marching crowd as confident, carnivalesque defiance. Although I do not have a comparative perspective with parades in other countries, since this was my first as a participant, I had the impression of a special exuberance among the marchers as they found like others in empowering numbers, and felt free to be visible in this temporary protected space. There was certainly a youthful character to the march, but multiple generations were clearly present, with a strong middle-aged contingent and quite a few children.

This was a dense group of paraders attempting to make their way through a relatively wide pedestrian boulevard that was clearly not wide enough; shoppers and tourists *en route* to their destinations found themselves squeezed between the parade edges and the buildings lining the streets. This did not appear to result in contentious confrontations. Onlookers of all ages, genders, and backgrounds seemed genuinely entertained and intrigued. They were observing a spectacle that included cross-dressers, a sea of crisply multicolored rainbow objects, costumes,

S. Pearce/Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

and musical performances. A range of outlandish, humorous dress drew considerable attention. The politics of the day did not dissuade the marchers from silliness, which seemed infectious. Nevertheless, there was a clear seriousness to this march. From the rooftop of the Burger King adjacent to Taksim Square on down the boulevard, observers cheered and waved flags from balconies and upper-floor restaurant windows—many were obvious allies who brought their own flags. Shopkeepers and shoppers stepped out of establishments to catch a glimpse. One could occasionally spot headscarved women dancing to the revelry, and I noticed at least one having her photograph made with a transvestite.

Geography matters. This neighborhood, known as Beyoğlu, is among the key tourist destinations of the city outside of the historic Sultanahmet area of the legendary Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia museum. In contrast to the latter, Beyoğlu is a loud, vibrant party district that includes one of the oldest architectural areas of the city, but is primarily known for its nineteenth-century architecture; it is home to several foreign consulates. The neighborhood sports a cosmopolitan flavor that includes rooftop terrace bars, dance venues, English-language bookshops, street musicians, and souvenir shops. Further, Taksim Square represents a secular space, home to a prominent military statue symbolizing the birth of the modern Turkish Republic, as well as the modernization of the center of Istanbul. I include a *caveat* here, as the neighborhood is not uniformly secular space. Two Christian churches are prominent, as well as an active lodge for Sufi dervishes. This was the context through which the Pride parade wove, with its dense street population composed of shoppers, tourists, and shop/restaurant/hotel employees.

Despite the divided parades (June 23 and June 30), there was evidence that the June 30 parade included many Trans people. One rode on the shoulders of a friend holding a sign declaring “Trans people do exist” in Turkish. This message could be open to more than one interpretation: an announcement of this fact to Turkish society, or a dig to this particular group of parade participants, given the division between the LGB and Trans communities. The former interpretation seems more plausible to me, as I did not detect any contentiousness toward other paraders. In fact, the parade was labeled “LGBT” and not simply “LGB.”

With the exception of some rituals that I will describe below, the parade resembled those in the West: it was a collective display of gaiety, public affection, solidarity, music, spectacle, love, fashion, and the occasional bold bawdiness. I saw Viennese masks, cowboy hats, construction worker helmets, elegant gowns, feathers, piercings, and many many wigs. As in past parades, a rainbow flag sprawled out in a scale to match the expanse of this street was prominent. Eventual estimates of the crowd size of the parade ranged from 40,000 to 100,000:

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

at least a doubling of the 2012 numbers of 20,000, if not a quintupling. Like the Trans parade, organizers and other observers credited the swell in these numbers to the Gezi Park protests that yielded new allies. Because LGBT activists had been dedicated and consistent contributors to this budding movement at the park, many responded in kind and joined the Pride parade.

There were signs across the day that the Pride parade was echoing, if not forwarding, the summer's broader anti-government protest action. The first sign that I noticed was marchers' response as they passed a Starbucks store on our right. People knowingly and collectively directed loud boos and angry gestures toward the store, and subsequent marchers continued the action. These same boos erupted twice again as we passed two other Starbucks further down the avenue. The background to this was that Gezi Park activists had run to the Starbucks storefront to escape police violence a couple of weeks prior, and the store locked its doors and would not admit them. This action drew broad scrutiny and criticism by angry activists. (Later I would learn that the decision to close the store was a hasty one by a barista who panicked, and claimed that without a manager present at the moment, she did not know if she had authority to allow the protesters in. Admittedly, prior to this event, Starbucks had been one of several businesses offering water and first aid to protesters.) A Mado ice cream store, one of a local franchise, drew the same boos from paraders, also because it refused shelter to Gezi Park activists. The presence of three Starbucks restaurants on the Pride parade route, in addition to a fourth at Taksim Square where the parade began, carries further symbolic significance, as it exemplifies the growing global corporatization and "mall-ification" of this Istanbul neighborhood that is drawing the ire of youth activists. (Similar trends were visible across the city. I spotted my first Krispy Kreme donut store, an American chain, in an Istanbul mall in 2013.)

Additional references to the Gezi Park movement abounded on June 30 on Istiklal Caddesi. A bold pink banner placed on the ground crossing the avenue read "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans RESISTANCE" with an image of one of the Gezi Park movement's new brands: the outline of a gas mask that recalls a stenciled "danger" symbol familiar to Turkish residents, usually stamped on electrical boxes and similar objects. Marchers carried one banner that sported the cartoon image of a penguin, which was another shorthand for the Gezi movement: as the protests heated up in late May, CNN Turkey had broadcast a documentary about penguins in the place of news footage of police violence against protesters. Many marchers in the Pride parade also displayed "Gezi-wear" (my term) of gas masks, helmets, and Guy Fawkes masks.

Beyond the allies from the Gezi Park movement, an interesting sprinkling of proud parents was also present in the June 30 parade; these

S. Pearce/Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

parents advertised themselves with signs that advertised, “My Child is Gay” (Browner 2013) in the Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish languages. The presence of these multiple languages speaks to another dynamic: the peaceful participation of diverse populations that more generally are at tense odds in Turkey—particularly between ethnic Turks and Kurds. This was not the first time that parents made their presence known in the neighborhood in support of the youth. Earlier in the summer, when Turkish politicians called for mothers to come retrieve their children from the Gezi Park protests and take them home, those mothers responded instead by descending on the site and surrounding their children in a large circle as they danced and sang, holding hands and moving as if performing a traditional *hora* dance.

Two ritualistic aspects of the June 30 march marked it as particular to Turkey. First, I have noticed an interesting uniformity to the forms of march signage in all protests I have observed in Istanbul that seems to give each event a certain neatness: messages are professionally printed on two sides of a circular sign approximately 12-18 inches in diameter in a uniform color, each with a wooden handle. It reminds me of the similarly uniform placards of American political party conventions. The Pride parade was a virtual sea of such signs in a variety of colors with a range of messages. A fun on-line video that chronicled activists assembling the signs labeled them “lollipops”—which is precisely what they resemble. There was another ritual that the marchers employed, which I had observed in other Turkish protests over the years for various causes. At certain points in the parade, the marchers collectively knelt, squatted, or sat on the ground temporarily, meditatively, and then rose in unison shouting a chant in an attention-getting gesture.

The Pride parade recalled local histories, such as community members who had lost their lives. One group carried a sign to honor the memory of gay rights activist Ahmet Yildiz, whom many alleged was killed by his father in 2008 for his sexual orientation. Yildiz was a 26-year-old university student at the time of his death. In 2012, a new film hit the Turkish cinemas that chronicled Yildiz’s life, entitled “Zenne Dancer” (Göksel 2013). The year 2012 had also marked Turkey’s first gay film festival.

When we reached a near-halfway point in the parade, the Galatasaray area (and home of a well-known local professional soccer team), I noticed for the first time that not all onlookers were supportive of this parade. A group of about 20 young men stood in a silent protest against the march, holding Turkish flags with a sky-blue background rather than red, staring through stoic, angry expressions. Each pointed toward us with an outstretched hand with their characteristic hand signal of an extended index and pinky finger. These men represented an ultra-nationalist group, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which

opposes Kurdish rights and EU membership—and is at odds with the current party in office (AKP) as well, in part due to the government's gestures toward both of these communities. Marchers smiled and flashed peace signs back at these resisters as they continued to file by. A heavy line of police officers created a human barrier between this group and the parade, and neither side attempted to transgress that barrier; since I was toward the back of the parade, my assumption is that no one had done so in the crowds that had already passed through. This was the only “trouble” that I noticed across the day. There were no reports of violent incidents for the duration of the parade.

Further down the parade route, I was surprised to spot Cihan, who helps organize the parade, among such a massive gathering. He was standing on the sidelines and intensely observing. After greeting him I realized that he was distracted, and I presumed he was counting the attendance, so I re-entered the procession. He did appear quite pleased, if not overwhelmed, with the crowds. I learned later that among the marchers were representatives of the CHP party, as well as the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) European Union parliamentarians, and the co-chair of the German Green Party, contributing to a growing legitimacy not only to this parade but to the notion of LGBT rights for Turkish citizens.

Although I had presumed that I was in the final stretch of the parade, I repeatedly turned around to view crowds behind me that stretched as far back as the eye could see. This view followed me all the way to the culmination of the march in a smaller square, Tunel, at the bottom of the boulevard, just as the promenade narrows to a cobblestone lane lined with musical instrument shops (the “music street”) that leads to a historic square with the picturesque medieval stone Galata Tower. In Tunel Square, I watched several young men playfully climb a tall steel-frame sculpture and drape it with a large rainbow flag, remaining atop the sculpture in proud poses. There continued to be revelry in the square by marchers who lingered for cheering, photographing, and chanting.

I found my way to an outdoor dining spot near Galata Tower, and was able to observe the aftermath of this carnivalesque atmosphere as marchers wandered through, basking in the excitement. This was an emotional state that had more recently been eclipsed at Gezi, as police crackdowns had moved the space from a spot of celebration and elation to one of anger and fear. After dinner, the parade finally over, I reversed the parade path and walked up to the top of the avenue, back to Taksim Square. I noted the high mood all along Istiklal, as former marchers giddily strolled up and down the street, many still in their parade costumes. I arrived up at Taksim to observe a different dynamic.

A group of approximately 10 marchers had returned to Taksim. Although the carnival feeling was still evident, and perhaps had emboldened this group, the marchers deliberately rushed the line of

S. Pearce/Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

police with heckles. Notably, in the same spot where I had seen a line of officers passively and nonaggressively standing guard behind paraders at the inception of the march, I now found police in full riot gear. In response to the hecklers, shields were raised and water cannons positioned. The parade had temporarily suspended this antagonistic opposition as police fulfilled their roles as parade-participant protectors. But with the parade's conclusion, the space returned to its earlier activist function and these two groups of actors renewed their previous relationship. After watching a playful back-and-forth for a few minutes, I decided it best to abscond and make my way to my residence.

REFLECTIONS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL/CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The year 2013 not only marked the largest Pride parade in Turkey to date, but the birth of two new parades. June 30 saw peaceful Pride parades in the Turkish cities of Izmir and Antalya. There were signs that the Istanbul event—and these smaller parades—held symbolic significance for marchers, along the lines that the scholar Begonya Enguix (2009) has observed in other countries: that Pride events help the LGBT community as it carves out “a space for vindication, [visibility], and commemoration”: victims of homophobic violence were recalled and honored in Istanbul, for example. And as Lynda Johnston (2005) has suggested, such events also help the community of sexual minorities to claim access to heteronormative public space physically, at least momentarily. Beyoğlu is a broadly owned space of tourism, entertainment, shopping, and clubbing. Therefore, the Turkish LGBT community was advertising its presence in such a “mainstream,” if not particularly traditional, lifeworld. On the other hand, this is precisely the corner of Istanbul where the gay community is geographically centered: it is the home of activist offices and gay clubs, and Gezi Park was known as an after-hours meeting place for romantic encounters. Thus, LGBT activists interpreted the government-directed gentrification and growing control of the neighborhood as a threat to their own turf, resulting in their insistent participation in the summer's anti-government protest scene. The government had targeted the Beyoğlu neighborhood in particular for “cleanup.” I happened to observe the trucks that descended on the neighborhood in the summer of 2011 with workers who aggressively confiscated tables and chairs of outdoor cafes in the name of public safety.

Soon after the 2013 parade, I began my summer teaching with international students, many from countries involved in the recent Arab Spring uprisings. I introduced them to Charles Tilly's theoretical schema of WUNC: that successful social movements share four common elements in their public displays that tend to move claims-making forward: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Applying his

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

schema to the parade I had just witnessed, does the turning point of a peaceful march in huge numbers (10,000 for the Trans parade and 100,000 for the LGBT parade) help to ensure a growing legitimacy for the cause? Does the “worthy” presence of governmental leaders, parents, and adorable children as marchers further this legitimacy? The theme of unity was mentioned explicitly by 35-year old parade participant Deryz Yusek, who explained to a journalist: “We haven’t seen this kind of unity in Turkey before . . . So it’s all great” (Browner 2013). Activists had carried signs calling for peace written in Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish (“Taksim Stages . . . ” 2013). I even wonder whether the movement is now feeling emboldened to take on the gay marriage issue, given the reference to marriage in the Pride week statements and the two wedding gowns that I noticed on parade participants (“commitment?”).

Although the parade ended mid-evening on June 30, the aftereffects of this day seemed to linger long past its conclusion. In July, the highly popular Turkish singer Sezen Aksu held a public performance in Istanbul. Across her musical career, this singer has spoken out for the oppressed. During her July concert, Ms. Aksu unfurled a large rainbow flag and asked the crowd, “Where are you, my dear?”, which was the theme line of the June Istanbul LGBT Pride parade. The audience cheered out of recognition (Akpınar 2013). More signs of growing confidence in visibility for the LGBT community could be glimpsed following the June 30th parade. Later in the summer, activists painted outdoor stairsteps in rainbow colors in Istanbul, after which authorities immediately ordered them repainted over in gray. This response only spurred a domino effect: activists fervently painted stairs in the same rainbow colors in cities across the country. In September, Turkey would see its first openly gay mayoral candidate, named Can Çavuşoğlu, an Istanbul native who has studied in the United States; he plans to run for office in a small Black Sea Coast town in March 2014 (“Turkey’s First Ever . . . ” 2013). In early 2014, the rainbow stair actions continue: one Istanbul set of rainbow stairs near Taksim Square is lined with stenciled colored “hands for peace” images accompanying each step. I find anecdotal evidence to support the observation by one of the Istanbul Pride organizers that the Gezi Park movement had done in one month for gay rights what could have normally taken three years to accomplish.

Turkish gay-rights activists have called on external assistance and human-rights instruments to help forward their goals—employing the “boomerang” approach, documented by Keck and Sikkink (1998). The activists’ mission has had assistance from outside observer groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Campaign, and Freedom House, who have critiqued Turkey’s record on human rights; treatment of LGBTI people has been receiving increased scrutiny. Further, as Turkey and several of its neighbors in the Western Balkans negotiate with the European Union for membership,

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

governmental leaders have been pressed to ensure that LGBT rights are secured. Among the requirements for EU membership are nondiscrimination policies and redress for criminal acts against sexual minorities. EU representatives have observed and commented on the safety of Pride parades in acceding member countries as signs of progress toward membership. Croatia, which joined the EU in the summer of 2013, held its first nonviolent Pride parade this same summer. EU observers reportedly commended the Istanbul parade for commencing peacefully, and similarly praised the Zagreb event (European Union 2013). Other policy developments were in progress during June of 2013: The EU's Foreign Affairs ministers published a new set of rules for LGBT rights by which current member countries are required to abide. These rules are far more strict and binding than any prior EU initiatives on this matter. Among the new requirements is one that applies to activists specifically: "Support and protect human rights defenders" ("EU Foreign Affairs Ministers . . ." 2013).

Turkish public discussions about human-rights standards are not immune to the same reactive verbiage common to some other world regions: "human rights" is a Western place-based invention, externally imposed (usually by those with the biggest guns), and disrespectful of local cultural roots. Calling on cultural relativism and post-colonial theories, these critiques have resulted in some level of hesitation within the West. Referencing this resistance and hesitation, however, Turkish activist Nevin Öztop had this to say to the EU in 2013, clearly dismissing such relativism and urging the body to ramp up its intervention even further:

We, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people, demand that you stand up for us, and stand against those who play with our lives. That you stand up with us against those who try to cover up discrimination in the name of morality, culture, and traditions and conceal hate crimes, hate speeches and even hate murders. . . . All member countries should carefully look at what they stand for, urge an end to discrimination in Europe, and never bargain or negotiate with member of associate member countries on the lives of LGBTI people during EU accession periods (ILGA-Europe 2013).

This activist views the current opportunity of EU "conditionality" as a window for more intensive continental support of his community's initiatives. Also evident in this demand is a self-presentation of Turkish cultures as multiple. As a transnational gay-rights movement has emerged and expanded, it has resulted in a transnational gay culture. Within Turkey this community is present as a subnational culture that

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

participates with its transnational alliances across borders. Clearly, Mr. Öztöp also sees himself as a member of the larger European community whom he expects to have his back. This dynamic suggests that the routine of playing the culture card as defense against external intervention is open for debate, since within Turkey as elsewhere, cultures are plural.

Among my takeaway lessons from the march on June 30 is the following: we need to pay attention to Pride parades. As with other public collective actions, they can resemble a Rorschach ink blot test for the researcher of human rights: this annual performance is a magnified moment on which a multitude of cultural and political meanings are potentially placed and read. Further, one event may even carry a level of power to inch societal attitudes forward. Lynn Hunt's book *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007) chronicles the growing public acceptability of human rights in the Enlightenment era. She proposes that the reading public developed feelings of empathy for those outside of their social circles in part through novel reading, where readers met sympathetic characters and even identified with individuals in the story. If Hunt is correct that "empathy only develops through social interaction" (p. 39), parades lessen that social distance. The evolution of a culture supportive of human rights, Hunt proposes, was both an emotional development and a reasoned political principle. It is possible that the wit and gaiety of a Pride parade can generate broadly shared—even if not universally shared—feelings across performers and audiences that can suspend the routine for a moment in time and, like this year's Istanbul parade, resonate in the days that follow.

The story of the public challenges to the rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues, as he faces growing public critiques by his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, who resides in the United States. Erdoğan's January 2014 appearance to a meeting of his political party that he could not attend in the form of a Wizard-of-Oz-scale hologram inspired parodies from his youth critics. Turkish financial markets and currency stability were also in a bit of turmoil as I wrote this, and a high-level political graft scandal had materialized, followed by attempts by the AKP party to shore up control of the judiciary, the internet, and social media. All pointed to a possible, though not inevitable, delegitimizing slide for the Prime Minister's rule. By all appearances, 2013 also represented a turning point for Turkey on the LGBT front—whether or not the two developments are related. The larger job of securing rights and justice in the face of homophobic and transphobic violence and exclusion is far from finished across Turkey, whether we reference the realm of mainstream culture or the right-wing extremes. I hope to find myself at the 2014 Istanbul Pride parade, even if the wait to enter the parade route takes *two* hours.

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

References

- “21st LGBT Pride Week.” 2013. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://prideistanbul.tumblr.com>)
- Akpınar, Ömer. 2013, 23 July. Turkish Singer Gave Support to LGBTs During Concert. Kaos GL. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://www.kaosgl.org/page.php?id=14555>)
- Browner, Erin. 2013, July 11. “Istanbul Protests Help Build Unity for LGBT Pride.” *Women’s eNews*. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://womensenews.org/story/lesbian-and-transgender/130710/istanbul-protests-help-build-unity-lgbt-pride>)
- Enguix, Begonya. 2009. “Identities, Sexualities and Commemorations: Pride Parades, Public Space and Sexual Dissidence.” *Anthropological Notebooks* 15:15-33.
- “EU Foreign Affairs Ministers Adopt Ground-Breaking Global LGBTI Policy.” 2013, June 24. Brussels: The European Parliament’s Intergroup on LGBT Rights. Retrieved January 31, 2014 (<http://www.lgbt-ep.eu/press-releases/eu-foreign-affairs-ministers-adopt-lgbti-guidelines/>)
- European Union. 2013. “Turkey 2013 Progress Report.” Retrieved January 31, 2014
(http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/turkey_2013.pdf)
- Göksel, Diba Nigar. 2013, March 28. “Gay Rights: Where is Turkey Heading?” Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://www.gmfus.org/archives/gay-rights-where-is-turkey-heading/>)
- Hunt, Lynn. 2007. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- ILGA-Europe. 2013. A Turkey and Europe with no LGBTIs. Till when exactly? Retrieved January 31, 2014 (http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/guide_europe/country_by_country/turkey/A-Turkey-and-Europe-with-no-LGBTIs.-Till-when-exactly)
- Johnston, Lynda. (2005). *Queering Tourism: Paradoxical Performances of Gay Pride Parades*. London: Routledge.
- Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activist Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Potts, Andrew. 2013, 24 June. “Istanbul Trans Parade Turns Gezi Park Protest.” *Gaystarnews*. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/istanbul-trans-pride-parade-turns-gezi-park-protest240613>)
- “Taksim Stages Exuberant Gay Pride March Joined by Gezi Protesters.” 2013, June 30. *Hürriyet Daily News*. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/taksim-stages-exuberant-gay-pride-march-joined-by-gezi-protesters.aspx?pageID=238&nID=49779&NewsCatID=339>)
- “Turkey’s First Ever Openly Gay Mayor Candidate Announces Bid.” 2013, 12 September. *Hürriyet Daily News*. Retrieved January 31, 2014
(<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-first-ever-openly-gay-mayor-candidate-announces-bid.aspx?PageID=238&NID=54344&NewsCatID=341>)

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128



S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128





Susan C. Pearce is Assistant Professor of Sociology at East Carolina University. She conducts research on the cultural contexts of politics, particularly concerning ethnicity, migration, gender, and social movements. She is the co-author of *Immigration and Women: Understanding the American Experience* (New York University Press, 2011, with Elizabeth J. Clifford and Reena Tandon), and the co-editor of the anthologies *Reformulations: Markets, Policy, and Identities in Central and Eastern Europe* and *Mosaics of Change: The First Decade of Life in the New Eastern Europe*. Currently, she is researching gender-based violence and migration from Southeast Europe (with a grant from the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars), immigration and intimate partner violence, immigrant women in North Carolina, and the collective memory the 1989

S. Pearce/ Societies Without Borders 9:1 (2014) 111-128

revolutions in East-Central Europe. She received her PhD in Sociology from the New School for Social Research, and has served on the sociology faculties of Gettysburg College, West Virginia University, University of Gdańsk (Poland), and Central European University (Poland).