

## CONFERENCE 'GEZI PROTESTS AND BEYOND. CONTESTING AKP RULE'

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School of Social and Political Sciences (Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas)

# LEAVING THE BUBBLE

## INTRODUCTION

Many debates have become since Taksim Gezi Park movement. This phenomenon is still being argued in Turkey and even here in Portugal which is geographically far from the case. While many scholars approach from political and social perspectives, today I will introduce you a new sight to the Turkish actuality.

What do you think of culture?

In fact, although the manifestations were pretended to be against to Prime Minister Erdoğan and AKP government, the motivation was not a suddenly decision of Turkish people who want to involve actively in the politic, but the feelings of anger and fear that each individual faced to lose their values and privacy. They reacted; because they were fed up that the prime minister was interfering with their culture.

In this presentation, I will talk you about firstly the notion of 'awareness of place' in the frame of citizenship and then will share the reflections of Taksim Gezi Park movement in my fieldwork among Izmir Festival participants. Before starting, you may question why I called almost poetically this presentation 'Leaving Bubble'.

## WHY LEAVING THE BUBBLE?

Last three decades witnessed fast growing of the cities in Turkey. After many dramatic changes in the physical and social environment as the consequences of the disproportionally increasing population by the migrations, the cities leaded the problems in the transport, safety and other facilities (lack of parking, relaxing, sport and divers leisure activities) Regarding to these facts, the locals had unavoidably alienation and left the city centre to live in the 'bubbles': the big residences, blocks or villas in the isolated sites of the city's outskirts. Thus, especially the metropolitan cities were transformed from a location to a consumed space. This seeking of 'bubble' was manipulated as well by the politics which emphasized the building constructions under the title 'urban renovation'. Whereas the cultural heritage became under threat because of the lack of belonging, the basic concept of the common city life which was providing the cultural interaction with the environment became limited.

Today the upper-middle and the elite class prefer to live in the neighbourhood which has a distance with the city which means the social control, stress, air pollution and the noise according to them. In Turkey, it's enough to open a magazine or newspaper to find many advertisements on which demonstrate a 'perfect' life for the future residents. No matter with the city's diversity; everything seems clean, safe and comfortable.

## **AWARENESS OF PLACE PROCESS**

Taksim Gezi Park movement has become the discovery of the city again by Turkish individuals. While there are still debates on urban renovation and city branding, the awareness of place is considered to be the first step of the place attachment and naturally citizenship; having the consciousness of taking the responsibilities of a location where we live.

Göregenli (2010) determines the places as active elements which surrounds the humans with consistent interaction. However, the static repetitive ones such as big blocks don't have tangible affects in a pedestrian's memory. Places play the orientation and way finding role while we move in the city. This role provides a functional meaning. If an example is given from the neighbourhood of Taksim Gezi Park, the entrance of *Galatasaray Lisesi* and *Tünel* (the entrance of funicular) might be taken into account. They differ quickly with their own characteristic shapes from other buildings on the *İstiklâl* Street. Locals use these landmarks to meet, to give an address or to make manifestations. Nevertheless, these places aren't only perceived because of their physical structure, but also as they have been many times meeting or manifestation place, they are embedded in the memory of the city.

Parallel to this, Izmir Festival whose venues are located both in the urban and rural areas are qualified as the historical places such as old factory, church and even castle which have been as well the witness of the past *par excellence* but actually have become invisible, because they are actually neither a landmark nor a functional dwelling in the daily life. Similar to Taksim Gezi Park, although they are sharing the city's memory and situated between the landmarks they were invisible before the performances as Gezi Park did before the manifestations. Still, when the performances were happening, the spectators consisting of local inhabitants could have some experiences with these places. They could confront with the past of the city and they were overlapped their personal history with the city's one. A place which has been invisible because of the negative connotations and lack of function in their daily life regained a new sense for them. They developed progressively a sensibility toward to the place where they involved especially actively such as a social interaction with the neighbourhood or the artistic impact of a performance. Thus, after the performances these places have been implicated into the perception map of the locals and the place that one participated collectively in the festival was created a new sense for oneself feeling connected emotionally.

In the case of Taksim Gezi Park which brought us to this conference hall, a festival was not necessary. The struggle between the police violence and the protesting local people which was turning sometimes to a turmoil has become a performance itself. The park was invisible or neglected because of the prejudices from ear to mouth like the area of drunken people, the prostitutes or a former cemetery of Armenian community. Now the park is quite visible and connotes various meanings apt to the individuals' commitment on the place or following through the social media.

## CASE STUDY

My methodology which consists of my participant observation and ethnographic interviews in Izmir among the festival participants contained unavoidably data referring to the manifestations. While I was in the fieldwork, the festival itself and my participants were affected by the enchained events. Thus, let me share with you my fieldwork notes in the opening concert of the festival in Ephesus on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2013:

“Finally the concert has started. The arias that are song by the singers of Izmir State Opera are listened quietly. I think ‘it’s so strange, while there is turmoil in Istanbul and Izmir city centre, we listen to *Tristan und Isolde* in this mild summer night’. Suddenly, the artists stop the performance, take out Turkish flags, put in front of note tables and shout ‘Yes to art!’ Following this, the local spectators stand up and repeat the slogan of the manifestation: ‘*Her yer Taksim, Her yer direniş!*’ (Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance) The tourists or the residents from Europe are surprised. Some of them watch the event with open eyes and firmly closed mouths. I see some others who take pictures. The spectators themselves became a performance.”

After that event, while I was making the deep interviews with my informants about awareness of place in Izmir Festival, they couldn’t stop themselves speaking about the actuality. Most of them were affected by the enchained events. They were following the news through Facebook and Twitter. They were sharing the visuals, announcements and making comments. Even, a married couple who have been my informants decided to cancel festival participation and went to Istanbul to support the movement. As an insider ethnographer I was hesitating to let myself into the climax of the case or to stay professional and finish my fieldwork.

Finally, I conceived that Gezi Park was not consisting only of a political and social movement and it was even relevant with my research. Thus, I implicated in my fieldwork and asked parallel questions about Taksim Gezi Park movement in the frame of the citizenship and the awareness of place. Here, let me share with you some findings. Informant Emre<sup>1</sup> (53) says:

“(…) before [the event], there was an understanding of an artistic production with a monument and creating the memories. And now, there is a discovery of a street while we escape [from the police] with a fear, our own emotions. I don’t say it only for Istanbul or Izmir. In most of the cities, people who go to streets, started to know the city and to have important memories. (...) I had a manifestation in that street, I had written a slogan to this wall. And we discovered for the first time our emotions. Therefore I am very happy”.

I ask: “So according to you, is Izmir Festival able to do a similar thing?” He replies:

“I think that it is a bit out of that line. Yes, the [festival] programs are important. But there has been a very important social action. The opening was in Ephesus, it was important but I wish it could be organized in Gündoğdu Square (the manifestation place in Izmir). I wish it could address from an artistic point and it could join this mass movement. Then it would be much more different. The program might have been changed, it could be cancelled. If (the actions of the artists) grew, the program would be cancelled. The artists came already from the squares (they had made actions before arriving to Ephesus amphitheatre). But the festival beware from that tempest.”

After the interview, we discuss about the invisible places in Turkish cities. In fact, including military zones and state buildings there are many forbidden areas. Referring to public spaces, I say “Don’t come, don’t enter...” and let the sentence open. The informant completes:

“Our Konak Theatre (the biggest state theatre constructed after the declaration of Turkish Republic in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century) is closed too. Even the toilet doors are locked. Let them enter for his toilet, what may happen? He shall enter, look and study the place.”

Second example is attributed to Sevim (50+). During the interview, she compares Taksim Gezi Park movement with Woodstock Festival and points out the artistic part of the manifestations. I say: “In fact, after Taksim making classical music has a new meaning like Fazıl Say...I mean he is stigmatized...The people adopted him.” She replies:

“Yes, Gülsin Onay came to (Taksim Gezi Park). She is my friend on Facebook. I followed her arrival on Facebook. That night she was not in Turkey. She might be at home, maybe in Cambridge. While I was sharing the hot news, she posted on her wall ‘I am in front of chimney with crispy firewood’. I said myself it was not the time for that but... I am sure that a person like her was not aware of it. (...) The day after, she learnt and posted consistently ‘my heart is in Gezi Park’ and asked more information about the event. (...) Then she wrote ‘Fazıl, come let give a concert there, let support these children.’, ‘if I come, a piano might be arranged?’ They answered ‘you come and we find you a piano’. It happened. She gave the concert. I mean I watched her only on the concert halls. (...) Myriads of people watched her supporting them, very identifying. Finally these three ones lie down: equality, freedom and brotherhood. In fact that’s what people seek.”

Later, when I make a second session with her and her husband they tackle with the content of festival, being the city’s festival and the cultural affect of music on the democracy. She says:

“The fundamental of democracy culture is polyphony. In that sense festival serves quite well but it can’t reach to its purpose, can it? (...)I want to mention this concerning Gezi event: to make there such beautiful productions, in the sense of music... I mean it was like a festival. Maybe it comes from that the protesters were the people who conceived already polyphony.”

Her husband, Ahmet (50+) reacts:

“In my opinion when the events came up the people didn’t know so much about polyphony. They have learnt as they lived it. [There were people] from different layers of the society in the same idea, maybe irrelevant behaviours; a religious one with an atheist or a homosexual with an anti-capitalist Muslim... [They said] ‘Aaa, there is this kind of world. The world that we call democracy and modernism is like that (...)’

Finally, they criticize the positioning of art festivals concerning the social events. They think that Izmir Festival is a festival who addresses mostly to the elites: the people who conceive already polyphonic music and who are wealthy. The male informant complains implying the democratic instinct of Taksim Gezi Park manifestations:

“(...) let count, how many people used to go before and now? There are friends who can’t go because they cannot afford it.”

I reply: “I think the street (I mean public space) has such a function. I mean the street is for everybody.” Sevim confirms my statement:

“It must be like that in fact. Last day I pass there and I see the cars making a pair of rang. The people sit and eat peacefully. If you implicate also art...here you go, like Italy. Each neighbourhood has its own square.”

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, AKP government still exploits the human rights and democracy in Turkey like the severe censorship on the internet and television following the assumption that the individuals' life are pursued illegally with diverse medias.

Different from other social movements in Turkey, Taksim Gezi Park has got humour and creativity emphasising the uniqueness of the individual. In the context of awareness of place process, it has some characteristics of Izmir Festival. The active participants act both individually and collectively and developed a sense of street, square and even park as my informants determined. In other words, they evoked the old notion of *mahalle*<sup>2</sup> in the Turkish culture and tasted the values like democracy, solidarity and citizenship.

Nowadays<sup>3</sup> Taksim Gezi Park is still evoked in Izmir. Another study needs to be done about the interest of them to the parks or other *lieux de memoire* which represent political past events of the cities. Nevertheless, there are still the remains of the last summer<sup>4</sup>. A slogan, graffiti or other mnemonic objects reveal that public space may have other functions than passing by and circulating to access each one's home and work. After the drastic preventions of the government lying on the legacy, Taksim Gezi Park is still evoked but now less enthusiastically as an extraordinary period of experiencing the freedom of expression, debates in forums and a slice of democracy and citizenship that it mentioned above.

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## NOTES

1. The names are changed to protect the privacy of the informant
2. Mahalle means administratively quarter of district but in the urban context it refers to the physical boundaries of an individual in his/her neighbourhood.
3. The period after the manifestations which comprises from August 2013 till May 2014 when there has been coal mine disaster in Soma.
4. Summer 2013, when the manifestations have been.

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