The Gezi Park Protests in Turkey: A Qualitative Field Research

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ABSTRACT *Civil protests began on May 27, 2013, in opposition to modernization works planned for Gezi Park near Taksim Square, Istanbul. The events that ensued between protesters and the government eventually led to protests across Turkey. Only time will tell how the social events that started with the Gezi Park protests will affect Turkey. This article attempts to address the dynamics of the Gezi Park protests and how it turned out to be so wide spread. This research is based on the data collected between June 12-16, 2013, with face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 62 activists in Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir and Eskişehir.*

I. Gezi Park Events: Qualitative Field Research

During protests and similar collective movements, the field of events is quite dynamic. Despite this complication, quantitative research was carried out by various organizations. Although their findings were varied, their research provided some insight into the ideological and political profiles of the Gezi Park protesters, as well as the dynamics of the events. The first of these surveys with an extensive sampling was carried out by KONDA Research and Consultancy. Between June 6-7, KONDA surveyed 4,411 protesters at Gezi Park.[1] Another study on the same days held by GENAR, with participation from 498 protesters in the Gezi Park and surrounding area.[2] MetroPOLL also surveyed 500 protesters within the park.[3]

These surveys give us some quantitative information about the demographics of protesters and their political tendencies. However, this information does not provide much more than just statistical data. In order to understand the personal incentives of the protesters, qualitative research must be carried out regarding the dynamics of the protests: what brought protesters there and what did they expect from the protests? To fulfill this task, this research is based on face-to-face interviews. The research

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was organized by the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA). Protesters consented to audio recordings of the interviews, which were then transcribed and analyzed.

II. Findings

a. The Political Profile of the Activists

i. Atypical Republican People's Party Supporters

The most debatable subject regarding the Gezi Park protests is the political backgrounds of the protesters. This subject is rather about *who* the protesters are. Politicians were the first to try to define the political alignments of the protesters, based on their own bias. For instance, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the protesters as "the puppets of foreign powers who do not want Turkey to progress" … "majority of whom come together to merely oppose AK Party government," and claimed that they were "vandals who have nothing to do with environmental concerns." Meanwhile, the Republican People's

Party (CHP), called the protesters "heroes … armed with global values" who were "demonstrating for freedom."

It is quite natural for different actors, looking through their own lenses, to ascribe different identities to the protesters. But who are the protesters, really? Is it possible to categorize them within a particular political framework? The earliest assumption prior to the research was that protesters were often not affiliated with any political party. However, quantitative research reveals that this argument is invalid.[4] The surveys show that the majority of Gezi Park protesters identified as CHP voters. According to the survey conducted by KONDA, 41 percent of the protesters voted for CHP in the 2011 general elections.[5] This number increases to 49 percent in GENAR's survey. In addition to this, GENAR asked the protesters which party they would vote for in the next elections and 64.7 percent of the protesters said CHP.[6] At this point, it is important to address an issue: If a significant portion of the protesters votes for a political party, what drives them to street demonstrations? Quantitative research is insufficient in finding the answer to this question. It lies in the qualitative in-depth interviews held with protesters: The CHP voters among the protesters are different from typical CHP constituency. We will refer to them within this paper as "atypical CHP voters."

The most important feature of atypical CHP voters is that they are most-

ly young people who are raised in a family of typical CHP voters. Even though atypical CHP voters don't trust politicians (including the CHP), they still vote for CHP when they go to the polls. There are different reasons why they vote for CHP despite their distrust. One of the reasons discovered in the research is the fact that CHP is the most influential choice against AK Party among the existing political parties. A 25-year-old female college-graduate protester who identified herself as a "humanist" said that she would futilely vote for CHP because she "cannot find any other party for whom to vote." She indicated that she did not vote in the 2011 elections because the present voting system is corrupt, and people at least have to boycott the elections for the removal of the 10 percent threshold that exists in the present electoral law. A 19-year-old protester described himself as a "moderate socialist" and "leftist" says that he would "vote for the CHP" although he does not support them, because he says "it is the only party that may challenge the AK Party." But at a certain point he adds that he does not "trust the CHP either." A 31-year-old female protester who aligns with "anti-capitalist Muslims" and "leftists" indicated that she had voted for the CHP in one election and for the Party of People's Voice (HAS) in another, but will vote for the CHP in next elections. What puts her into the category of an atypical CHP voter is that even though the CHP definitly does not meet her concerns, she will vote for it "because we lack any right-wing alternative to AK Party … and because there is no oth-

er way to vote fort he left other than the CHP."

ii. Antisystemic Radicals
As the quantitative research clearly shows, atypical CHP voters comprise only about half of the protesters. A portion of the rest of the protesters (around 30 percent of the participants) consists of radical people who do not put any trust in political institutions, and therefore do not support any political party. So what keeps the youth away from party politics, and what makes the system disreputable in their eyes? A 24-year-old protester who is also a Green Peace activist and who did not want to confine herself to any ideological bracket, argued that she does not trust the election system in any way because there has always been, and will always be, ways to "trick" the system. For this reason, she has never voted and will never vote in any elections. Another protester, a 25-year-old woman, declared that she never felt part of any political opinion and has therefore never voted in any elections; she is quite determined to keep this attitude in the next elections. This protester said that if she ever sees an honest politician running for the benefit of the country, she would vote for him/her without regard to the political party. A Marxist-Leninist protester, aged 20, said that he deliberately did not vote in previous elections and will not go to the polls in the next elections. When he was asked about why he did not vote even for socialist parties, he argued that "elections are nothing but an illusion trick" and "if elections were truly able to change

things, the state would abolish voting." According to him, Turkey is ruled by "a fascist state authority" and "since imperialist powers are satisfied with this system, nothing will change through elections." The idea that the political system is the very product of the global imperialist powers is the main factor behind the distrust of anti-sytem radical protesters.

iii. Supporters of the Political Parties Below the Threshold

Some of the protesters declared that they have voted, or will vote, for the political parties which are mostly considered radical leftists who work for communism, socialism,and the working class. These parties remain below the 10 percent threshold in elections. According to the survey conducted by KONDA, a sum of 3 percent of the protesters are the voters of such parties.[7] For these protesters, there are two kinds of political parties in Turkey: "parties of the system" and "antisystemic parties." According to this view, for example AK Party CHP, and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) are the systemic parties. As for the antisystemic parties, a few examples mentioned by the protesters are the Labor Party (İP), Communist Party of Turkey (TKP), and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). A 19-year-old protester who described herself as "leftist but not of nationalist (*ulusalcı*) kind" says that she will "definitely not vote for AK PARTY, CHP, and MHP." When she was asked why she would not vote for the three parties whose votes constitute nearly 90 percent of the votes in previous

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elections, she claims that these parties are the part of the "exploitation order" and the actors of "fascist oppression" in this country. According to her, the education system exploits students, the health system exploits patients, and the economic system exploits labor; therefore, the most powerful political parties work for the persistence of this very capitalistic system. Another 17-year-old protester claimed that he would vote for a platform named People's Democratic Congress (HDK) – which is a kind of confederation consisting of Platform for Peace and Democracy, Labor Party, Socialist Democracy Party, and the Socialist Party for Oppressed – in the next elections. He said he "never votes for bourgeois parties." When he was asked about what he meant by "bourgeois parties," he named AK

Party, CHP, and MHP as the prominent bourgeois parties of Turkey. Another 19-year-old protester described himself as a "socialist" and said that he "would vote for BDP," adding that "BDP is the only party in the Assembly supporting the rights of women, as well as others, and, in other words fort he rights of all peoples."

b. Incentives for the Gezi Park Collective Actions

It is not always simple to put on the map what lies beneath as social motives in the collective actions like Gezi Park protests. What is the motivation behind joining such a risky protest? Why do people become involved with a cause that is polarizing enough to incite excessive police force? In this research, we have identified two types of incentives that lead people to join the protests: *Pull* incentives and *push* incentives. The former are the motives allowing protesters to *come* to the field of protest, and the latter are the motives allowing protesters to *go* to the field of protest.

i. Pull Incentives for GP Protesters
One of the important factors that influence the activists' participation in collective protests is the attractiveness of the area of the protest. In addition to the physical location of the demonstration area, the preferred methods and tools of the demonstration as well as the spontaneous progress of the events are factors that contribute to the appeal of the protest area. The critical step in initiating collective protests is the organizational phase. It is in this phase that crucial

decisions are made about who will come together where, when, and for what. This decision is mostly made by a core staff. The more creative the team is, and more accessible the area is, then the more attractive the protest becomes. Gezi Park is in close proximity to one of the most central places in Istanbul – Taksim Square – and therefore it provided natural logistic support for the protesters in this regard. This advantage contrib-

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uted to the attractiveness of the area and influenced both the diversity of protesters and the number of them.

Most of the developments in the implementation phase of the protests are spontaneous. The most important event that made the protests at Gezi Park even more attractive was the police intervention to the core team of the protests at the night of May 30. Police staged a dramatic operation at dawn, dispersing the small crowd of protesters. Following this, the activists made a call through social media for a major gathering at the park. That evening, more than 10,000 people congregated at Gezi Park. Of course, the protest area was attractive not only for protesters but also for curious onlookers, security forces, and professionals like journalists and researchers. Depending on the logistic appeal of the demonstration area, the crowds increase exponentially; and similarly, decrease exponentially with police intervention. One of the most important factors that increased the number of Gezi Park protesters was the use of social media. According to the survey conducted by KONDA, 69 percent of the protesters were informed via social media about the drastic police intervention of the first day. This is very high compared to the ratio of the protesters informed with television, which is 7 percent.[8]

Another significant factor influencing the attractiveness of the protest area was the 'carnivalesque' atmosphere of the protests. The collective protests that began at the end of May – and especially between June 7-15, when there was no police intervention – created a carnivalesque atmosphere, as Mikhail Bakhtin mentions in his seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin explains that opposites come together in carnivalesque environments, behaviors that cannot be exposed in normal times appear in the carnivalesque times and different forms of reasoning along with the dominance of sense of humor overflow the carnivalesque area.[9] The protest areas in the Gezi Park events turned out to be a "fairground of thoughts" where mostly the leftist organizations introduced themselves and their publications. Gezi Park –

with its free food and beverages, and a unique atmosphere where different oppositional actors interacted without any altercation and under the full control of protesters – was a "trial of communist revolution," in the words of a 22-year-old male protester.

i. Push Incentives for the GP Protesters

The lifespan of a collective protest is usually very brief. However short-lived, the set of deeply-rooted factors that trigger such a mass reaction must be identified. Earlier, we discussed the various factors that *pull* people to protest sites. We must now ask: Why would an individual who could join the protests choose to not participate? Now, we should look for other forces at play that motivate people to join protests. We call these forces *push incentives*. These push incentives either come to the individual as default, or they are acquired through the experiences of the individual and contribute to his/her political and ideological priorities. The individual's personal experiences, class identity, ethnic background, religious beliefs, and even family background are factors into the formation of push incentives.

The majority of Gezi Park protesters cite restrictions on liberties, government interference in their daily lives, and the Prime Minister's authoritarian rule as their reasons for joining the protests. Polling data also confirms that many participants listed "liberties" among their reasons for protesting. While the KONDA survey established that 58.1 percent of activists came to the protest site in defence of their liberties,[10] a later survey by MetroPOLL put this number at 32.8 percent.[11] There is little doubt that Gezi Park demonstrators generally maintain a distance from the AK Party, with residual feelings of anger and discomfort mainly based on ethnic and sectarian identities. Unfortunately, polling data does not allow for an assessment of participants' socio-cultural and economic status. However, our interviews support the following view: Among Gezi Park protesters, ethnicity and religious affiliation would appear to underlie much of the anger as opposed to economic problems. Activists largely believe that the AK Party government – and Prime Minister Erdogan in particular – represents a threat to their liberties that they tend to associate with identity and belonging. For instance, a self-described revolutionary 23-year-old male activist who stated that he was unwilling to vote for any political party, referred to new restrictions on the sale of alcohol, as well as various instances of censorship including internet regulations, as his primary concerns. Another 17-year-old self-described socialist who plans to vote for the CHP in the upcoming elections believed that freedom of expression was under attack from the government. She recalled student activists' imprisonment over protests to eliminate tuition fees at public universities, and argued that restrictions began to target people's personal lives.

An interesting development, meanwhile, was that the environmentalist

discourse that was originally at the heart of the Gezi Park protests faded away as the demonstrations expanded their scope and reach. According to the KONDA survey, only 4.6 percent of Gezi Park protesters stated that their primary demand from the government was that "the trees not be cut down."[12] Similarly, our field interviews corroborated the view that environmental concerns triggered the demonstrations but lost their original significance within the broader set of goals and requests.

b. The Tautology in Selective Incentives for Activists

In his famous work *The Crowd*, Gustave Le Bon aptly asserts that "the improbable does not exist for a crowd."[13] Truly, individuals at protest sites tend to develop a belief that nothing is impossible. This attitude rests on the idea that "even the most unlikely developments" have occurred as seemingly irreconcilable ideological groups and currents united against a strong government. For example, an 18-year-old male activist who identified himself as a Kemalist stated that groups of people who previously looked down on each other developed a unique sense of solidarity, and that even opposing soccer fans who would go as far as killing each other participated in the effort. Protesters in other cities also described a similar situation of comradery. The case of soccer fans in Izmir who support local rivals Göztepe and Karşıyaka – best known for their violent behavior toward each other – was particularly interesting as the two groups could unite under the same tent at the pro-

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test site. For many local residents, this development represented an improbable junction.

While many viewed the Gezi Park protests as a revolution, others described the events as an awakening, an act of resistance, the people's warning shot to the government, and a popular movement. In one way or another, activists believed that Turkey would not be the same in the aftermath of the protests. But what did they specifically think would be changed in the country? What were their expectations from the protests? What did the government need to do in order for them to abandon the protest site and go back home?

Such collective acts tend to be trapped in tautology in terms of their goals and demands: When protesters are met with police raids and other crowd-control measures, they face arrest, the risk of injury, and – in extreme cases – death. Later, protesters demand that the perpetrators resign

and the detained activists be released. Governments tend to regard such demands as impossible to address, and therefore reject them. In response, the protesters' demands develop into slogans and emerge as a primary objective for the crowds. At this point, what happened as a result of the protest itself comes to define its purpose. During the 1968 uprising in France, young activists demanded the release of their imprisoned compatriots, the re-opening of the Sorbonne that was shut down as a result of protests, and the officials' resignation. A similar tautology emerged during the Gezi Park protests. Taksim Solidarity, an impromptu platform that claimed to represent the protesters, presented the government with five demands: (1) Guarantees that Gezi Park would remain a park; (2) an end to police brutality and the resignation of governors, police commissioners, and other officials in Istanbul, Ankara, and elsewhere; (3) the imposition of a ban on the use of tear gas; (4) the release of detained activists; and (5) the lifting of all restrictions on meetings and protests in public squares across the country.

It was noteworthy that the protesters' short-term demands were wrapped around the aforementioned tautology, while their long-term expectations were generally symbolic and mere slogans. For instance, when activists demand freedom, it would be unrealistic for any government to address this demand with immediate effect. Persuading protesters to cease the demonstrations would be the government's immediate concern.

Moreover, what specific steps would the government have to take in order to demonstrate its willingness to accommodate the protesters' demands for freedom? In order to understand the dilemma at hand, we must consider how slogans relate to reality and the *individual's* relationship with the *crowd*. According to Le Bon, the individual who has become a part of the crowd develops a new set of priorities unlike their previous concerns: "All will depend on the nature of the existing cause, and no longer, as is the case of the isolated individual, on the relations existing between the act suggested and the sum total of the reasons which may be urged against its realization."[14]

Freudian thought also corroborates with Le Bon, but offers a minor addition: The individual as part of a crowd does not transform into a different individual, but merely experiences more explicit manifestations of their unconscious within the collective entity.[15] Despite this minor difference, Sigmund Freud and Le Bon agree that participation in a mob sets aside individual reasoning and makes room for a new way of thinking. Truly, the vast difference between Turkey's political realities and Gezi Park's collective demands remains striking. After all, neither the AK Party nor the Prime Minister would possibly resign in order to accommodate the protesters' demands. Therefore, slogans on the protest site really reflect the desires, not demands, of the crowds.

When asked about their demands, almost all interviewees engaged in the

above-mentioned yearning for the impossible. For instance, an 18-year-old male activist who identified himself as a Kemalist argued that the Prime Minister should apologize for calling them "looters" and "drunks," and guarantee that Gezi Park shall remain a public park in an effort to end the protests. However, later during the interview, he voiced his lack of clarity regarding his motivations and expectations: "I am confident that people, not only in Turkey but across the world, will talk about us for what we do here. And I know that I will take pride in my involvement when I'm older. Just for that reason, we should stay here."

However, the unrealistic nature of collective demands and unconscious desires must not lead us to believe

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that the protests are entirely dysfunctional. Collective acts always have the potential to influence government long-term policies and plans. Countless cases across the globe attest to this type of interaction. What we try to establish here, on the other hand, is that in the struggle between the government and protesters, *form* takes precedence over *content* in collective acts where crowds attain agency.

III. Conclusion

The Gezi Park protests in Turkey attracted vast national and international attention due to their reach. From the onset, the sense of confusion regarding the demonstrations in Turkey and elsewhere gradually gave way to various interpretations based on the commentators' individual bias: for some, the protests represented a revolution, while others believed this was nothing but treason. However, classical sociology's lesson regarding the interpretation of such events is that reductionism often leads to misinterpretation. Social movements are composed of various components which produce a collective entity unlike their sum. In other words, social movements cannot be reduced to their individual components. Of course, the Gezi Park protests reflected demands for more freedom, environmental concerns and pro-democracy messages. Similarly, the events are not entirely exclusive of international interests and incentives, nor the risk of conspiracy. Nonetheless, the Gezi Park protests cannot be reduced to either set of messages. In order to accurately represent the collective entity that these individual components form together, we must adopt a non-reductionist sociological approach – which this study aimed to adopt and maintain.

Looking at the history of collective acts in Turkey, it is possible to establish that there is a close relationship between the country's modernization and its youth movements. As such, the emergence of civilian protests and

demonstrations are syncronized with the history of modernization. Clearly, social movements inclusive of students and young people took place in earlier centuries, but such events either began as violent uprisings or fell victim to a cycle of uncontrollable violence shortly after their initiation.[16] Modern Turkey's first student protests took place in the latter half of the 19th century. The Kuleli Event in 1859 was the first youth movement in the rapidly modernizing Ottoman Empire.[17] Later on, another student uprising in May 1876 forced the Grand Vizier and the Sheikh al-Islam to resign. These protests, which eventually deposed Sultan Abdulaziz, marked a turning point in the history of power struggles between young people and the state. The Young Turk movement, whose legacy remains relevant to contemporary Turkish state and society, undoubtedly gained confidence from the 1876 uprising, even though the two movements differed in context. Following the restoration of a constitutional monarchy in 1908, the increasingly confident youth opposition repeatedly made its presence known over the years.

Having established that modernity serves as fertile ground for struggles between youth movements and government authority, we must liken this situation to philosophy's famous chicken-and-egg problem. In other words, we must question whether youth movements become empowered as a result of Turkey's transformation, or the improved organization skills of the youth transformed the country. Without question, both

approaches are simultaneously accurate. Therefore, we can expect that social movements initiated by young people which expand their reach to other groups shall not cease to exist. However, it is necessary to highlight one characteristic that distinguished the Gezi Park protests from all its predecessors: Earlier movements resulted from the government's unwillingness to address the youth's demands for modernization. Gezi Park protests, on the other hand, reflected the youth's opposition to the government's modernization plans. This is closely related to urbanization and modernization patterns in the Republic's history. Over the course of 90 years, a significant part of the rural population relocated to cities. Each generation adapted to city life better than the previous generation, and assimilated to modernity with greater enthusiasm. As such, it was during the AK Party's tenure that a vast peripheral population began to advocate modernity. Having been categorically opposed to modernity for years, and utilized this approach as the foundation of their political identities, these masses made their peace with modernity over the past decade. This realignment of the Republic's founding elite and the religious masses through Turkey's modernization must be kept in mind in order to accurately account for the Gezi Park protests.

Finally, we must understand that the Gezi Park protests represented a symptom, and therefore maintained only an metaphorical relationship with the underlying problem. As

such, the security forces' 'success' in dispersing the crowd does not necessarily indicate that all problems have been resolved. So long as Turkey's modernization process continues, we can confidently predict that similar developments shall take place in the future. Especially when keeping an eye on technological developments that facilitates the initial efforts to organize, similar protests are only likely to occur with greater frequency. ⬤

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2. http://www.GENAR.com.tr/files/GEZIPARKI_PROFIL-SON.pdf, accessed 6 July 2013

3. http://www.MetroPOLL.com.tr/report/gezi-parki-protestolari-haziran-2013, accessed July 6, 2013.

4. Bilgiç and Kafkaslı's work seems to have a contrary judgment by finding out that most of the protesters "do not feel close to any political party". But one should notice that "feeling close" is different from "voting action".

5. http://www.KONDA.com.tr/ , accessed July 6, 2013.

6. http://www.GENAR.com.tr/files/GEZIPARKI_PROFIL-SON.pdf, accessed July 6, 2013.

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9. Bakthin, 1984: 4-5.

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12. http://www.KONDA.com.tr/ accessed July 6, 2013.

13. Le Bon, 2002: 14.

14. Le Bon, 2002: 14

15. Freud, 1949: 9-10.

16. A 16th-century revolt organized by madrasa students in the Ottoman Empire joined forces with Celali Revolts during the same period and led to bloodshed for almost five decades. (Aktar, 1999: 85-87)

17. The event was named after Istanbul's Kuleli district where members of an underground organization plotting to depose Sultan Abdulmecid were questioned. Ahmet Bedevi Kuran described the organization as "one of the revolutionary organizations active in our country and a predecessor of Young Ottoman and Young Turk movements." (Kuran, 1945: 8)