



## Embodied spaces of resistance<sup>☆</sup>

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### SYNOPSIS

May 27, 2013 marked the beginning of a series of nationwide public protests in Turkey, which originated as a small scale sit-in at Gezi, a central park in Taksim, İstanbul, to protest urban renewal plans for the area. Shortly, their agenda broadened to cover the authoritarian policies of the Prime Minister and his Islamist government. The protests are open to interpretation and analysis at many levels ranging from economics and politics to cultural and social issues. Here I focus on the articulation of space, discourse and subjectivity by looking at specific instances of the Gezi movement. Drawing from the work of critical theorists of space, I argue from a Deleuzian perspective that during the protests, spaces and spatial practices have been not only explicitly sexualized but also binary pairs of woman/man and private/public have been creatively deterritorialized, and paved the way for alternative trajectories of political action.

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### Introduction

On May 27, 2013 at 11:30 pm. bulldozers drove into Gezi, a central park in Taksim, İstanbul, to uproot five trees to clear the ground for the construction of a shopping mall. Within a couple of hours, a group of 20–30 people came to sit-in to stop the work. As members of civil societies, 'Taksim Solidarity' and the 'Society for the Preservation and Beautification of Gezi Park,' they had long been active to stop the Taksim renewal project that had been initiated by the Prime Minister in 2011. According to the project, vehicular traffic would be directed underground; surrounding buildings' facades would be restored to their original state; and most significantly the Ottoman barracks in Gezi Park, which had been demolished in 1940 to make room for green space, would be rebuilt to house a shopping mall (Hürriyet, 2011). Both 'Taksim Solidarity' and the 'Society for the Preservation and Beautification of Gezi Park' were founded to raise awareness of the historical status of the park and criticized the new project for detaching the area from its immediate surroundings and

historical associations.<sup>1</sup> As they argued, the park was one of the rare recreation areas at the city center, otherwise filled with concrete blocks of hotels, offices and apartments (see Fig. 1).

The small scale sit-in at the park marked the beginning of a significant social movement, hitherto known as the Gezi Movement. Within a few days, as the number of occupants who pitched tents at the park increased to hundreds, the resistance disseminated not only to other neighborhoods in İstanbul but also to other cities, turning into a nationwide movement with global repercussions. It soon became clear that the space of the protests was no longer bounded by Gezi Park and the scope of the movement was no longer limited to an environmentalist agenda. Besides the renewal plans for Taksim, the protesters raised their voices against the authoritarian policies of the Prime Minister and his Islamist government, which countered the protests with severe police intervention. Within a month, five protesters and one policeman lost their lives in İstanbul, Antakya, Adana, Ankara and Eskişehir; hundreds were injured by batons, pepper spray and water cannons; and many were arrested throughout the country.

Involving such critical issues as democratic governance, state control and police brutality, Gezi Park protests are open to interpretation and analysis at many levels ranging from economics and politics to culture and society. Despite being

<sup>☆</sup> Parts of the material that is covered in the second section of this article were framed differently and presented as a paper at the Mediated City conference, held in London, April 1–3, 2014, which is available at the organizers' online paper series.



**Fig. 1.** Aerial view of Gezi Park and Taksim area.  
Source: Google Earth, Retrieved August 12, 2013.

tightly connected to almost all these levels, the significant interweave of space, gender, and sexuality has been a conspicuously absent topic in the discourse on the resistance. The focus of this article is the embodied production, regulation and transgression of space during the Gezi Movement in Istanbul.

### Discursive context

As contemporary critical theorists have pointed out, urban spaces are not passive containers of their inhabitants, but complex mechanisms that orient, organize and control gendered and sexualized bodies, which in turn may subvert such regulations (Bondi & Rose, 2003; Grosz, 1992; Pain, 2001). The relationship between gender, sexuality and space emerges as a critical theoretical issue here. As the Gezi Movement confirms, this is a fluid relationship that depends on particular historical and social contexts.<sup>2</sup> Patriarchal notions of modern public spaces are based on the conflation of gender and (hetero)sexuality and strict divisions between the public and private spheres. The lack of reflection on such notions is surfaced by critical thinkers like Petra L. Doan, who call for a focus on the sexualized nature of the city. Pointing to the heteronormative conceptualizations of gender (man and woman) and sexuality (normal and abnormal), Doan calls attention to the deficiencies of heterosexist visions of urban order. The spatial practices of the protesters in the Gezi Movement radically challenged such visions and highlighted both how patriarchal notions of gender have been used to produce and regulate space and how such production can be creatively undermined by alternative performances of gender and sexuality.

The historical constitution of the patriarchal state structure in Turkey has been studied in detail by feminist thinkers (Arat, 1997 and 2009; Baydar, 2002; Kandiyoti, 1997). It is only recently that the President openly declared that women are naturally unequal to men and said that being a mother is a woman's primary role in society (Hürriyet Daily News, 2014). This declaration is in sharp contrast with the gender equality discourses that preceded the present Islamist government. Indeed Turkish women received considerable social and legal gains after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923.<sup>3</sup> Yet critical feminist scholarship revealed that at its best, gender equality has been practiced at the expense of the recognition of women's sexuality and the notion of the heterosexual family as the basis of social propriety remained historically unchallenged.

In discussing patriarchy in the context of the Gezi Movement, author F. Doğan (2013) claims that the state-society relationship in Turkey has historically been analogous to the nuclear family structure, whereby the state functions as a masculine apparatus that governs the mother-land and treats the population as adolescents who need to be shown the right from the wrong. This metaphor powerfully highlights the patriarchal juxtaposition of gender and (hetero)sexuality: The state functions as the law-making father, the land is identified as the house which is associated with the mother, and the population consists of adolescents who need to be kept under control. As I explicate below, the figures of the heterosexual family and the house were repeatedly mobilized during the Gezi Movement both as elements of control by the state and as means of subversion by the protesters.

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