

## COMMENTARY

## “Resistance everywhere”: The Gezi revolt in global perspective

Cihan Tuğal

One of the slogans of the Gezi revolt, “Everywhere is Taksim, resistance everywhere,” is a condensed expression of its global significance. Another slogan in the Brazilian uprising further emphasized the linkages and underlined the centrality of Gezi: “The love is over, Turkey is right here.” A wave of revolt had started with Greece, Iceland, and other Western countries in 2009. Revolt then spread to Tunisia and Egypt, and then back to the West in 2011, with the United States, Greece, and Spain at the center. As the wave seemed to subside, Turkey and Brazil erupted in 2013.

Even mainstream journalism recognized the significance of Gezi’s connectedness with this global wave. *The Economist* put the image of a young Turkish woman carrying a smart phone on its cover. It also remarked that, unlike the more regionally restricted “global” revolts of the last centuries, the 2009-2013 revolt had spread “everywhere.”

Since the countries shaken by this wave of revolt display starkly different dynamics, it appears that it is technology (and more broadly style) rather than social factors that link the uprisings to each other. However, even the apparent stylistic commonalities, such as the occupation of town squares, expose a common political and sociological denominator. In the case of the current revolutionary wave, if not in all cases, the form is the content.

2011 is a symptom (and has the potential to be the precipitator) of the crumbling of the current world order. This order has two major driving forces which are contingently articulated to each other: neoliberal capitalism and American leadership (in coordination with regional leaderships). I will take up each respectively in the following two sections.

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## Revolts against commodification and authoritarianism

The revolts of the current wave attack commodification in its multiple guises, rather than capitalism as such; that is, the division of society into the business class and the working class, and the wage labor system.<sup>1</sup> Polanyi argued that mobilization against the commodification of nature, money, and labor helped bring about the downfall of classical liberalism.<sup>2</sup> We are possibly heading towards a similar downfall, this time of what has been, perhaps misleadingly, called neoliberalism. Yet, unlike in Polanyi's analysis, the commodification of labor is much less of a public and politicized issue in our era, which poses certain problems regarding what exactly will replace neoliberalism.

In the United States, the commodification of money was at the center of the revolt. In Turkey, the main capitalist threat that was addressed was the commodification of nature and other shared space. The commodification of labor occasionally occupied center stage in Brazil, southern European countries, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Despite these differences, an emphasis on urban space through the occupation of public squares has been a common characteristic of all of these protests. Real estate bubbles, soaring housing prices, and the overall privatization-alienation of common urban goods constitute the common ground of protests in as diverse places as the United States, Egypt, Spain, Turkey, Brazil, Israel, and Greece.<sup>3</sup>

As in 1968, students have played an important role in today's revolts. Unlike in that revolt, however, they were not the leaders. In Turkey, for example, students' heavy participation has been noted. However, according to the Konda survey (by no means a perfect instrument), more than half of the occupiers had a job, while only around one third were students.

Just as crucial to these revolts (with the exception of the Arab cases) was the shattering of a key myth of the last 35 years: the necessary link between liberalism and democracy.<sup>4</sup> The development and deployment of new police state techniques intensified throughout the revolt, underlining the authoritarian tendencies of the world's liberal leaders and their followers. Just like in the Paris Commune

1 For the links between the crisis of capitalism and the Gezi revolt, see Immanuel Wallerstein, "Uprisings Here, There, and Everywhere," *Fernand Braudel Centre: Commentaries* 356, July 1, 2013, <http://www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/commentaries/archive-2013/356en.htm> and Slavoj Žižek, "Trouble in Paradise," *London Review of Books* 35, no. 14: 11-12.

2 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).

3 Sara Fregonese, "Mediterranean Geographies of Protest," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 20 (2013): 109-14.

4 Nuray Mert, "Paradigmaların Çöküşü," *BirGün*, June 28, 2013.

of 1871, issues of capitalism and police control became inextricably linked.<sup>5</sup>

### “Western” cases

Even though the 2009-2013 revolts were reactions to several aspects of commodification and authoritarianism, there were variations, especially regarding which aspects came to be emphasized. The revolts in Iceland, Greece, Spain, and the United States developed as direct responses to the financial meltdown of 2008, but they also mobilized many specifically national grievances.

In Greece, protest unfolded in the context of a crony capitalism unevenly integrated into European political and economic structures. Much like in the Turkish and Egyptian cases, police violence was central to the explosion: the fatal shooting of a 15-year-old in December 2008 was the initial trigger. Unlike in Turkey, however, the ensuing protests targeted capitalism more openly. In comparison to the United States, the occupations were much more violent and widespread, expanding to high schools, municipal administrative buildings, and trade unions.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on corruption also brought the Greek and Spanish<sup>7</sup> cases closer to the Arab cases than the American case. Above all, some have argued, the youth revolted against their lives’ reduction to insignificance and emptiness by neoliberal reforms and values.<sup>8</sup> Revolt persisted at intervals, reaching another peak in May 2011, when it returned to focus on multiple issues, almost all of them linked either to neoliberal reform or police violence. The protests were accompanied by popular assemblies, which featured rotating speakers (all limited to 2 minutes) rather than spokespersons.<sup>9</sup> This technique spread from one country to the other in the coming months.

Although Spain’s national issues bear some resemblance to those of Greece, the former country displays stronger parallels to the economic and political structures of world capitalism’s core countries. The bursting of the

5 Only positivistic formalism chooses to ignore how police violence is tightly connected to broader issues in such revolts, especially those that are connected to class and capitalism. For an example, see Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and critical responses by Ted Margadant, *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 3 (1998): 710-12 and Kim Voss, *International Labor and Working-Class History* 52 (1997): 186-88.

6 Costas Panayotakis, “Reflections on the Greek Uprising,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 20, no. 2 (Jun 2009): 97-101.

7 For more on the Spanish revolt, see Neil Hughes, “‘Young People Took to the Streets and all of a Sudden all of the Political Parties Got Old’: The 15M Movement in Spain,” *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 4 (2011): 407-13.

8 Christos Memos, “Neoliberalism, Identification Process and the Dialectics of Crisis,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34, no. 1 (2010): 210-16.

9 Costas Douzinas, “Athens Rising,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 20, no. 1 (2013): 134-38.

real estate bubble was at the forefront of the Indignado (“The Outraged”) and Occupy protests in Spain and the United States. Both economies had been turning away from industrial development towards financial and real estate speculation.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, however, revolutionary equality and the downfall of all inegalitarian systems were not formalized or programmatic demands, but a prefigurative performance. Or, to be more precise, this is what the pro-Occupy and pro-Indignado analysts claimed. Since the protestors in these cases (especially in the US) held back from making proclamations that would sum up the practices of the uprisings and lay bare their meanings (for, it was frequently held, such representative statements would create hierarchies among the protestors), it was analysts who spoke regarding the overall meanings of the movements (thus creating or sustaining hierarchies in unintended ways).

Young people’s precarious lives, including job insecurity, high unemployment, low wages, and bad housing conditions, were central to the Spanish protests. Even though demands for participatory democracy, decentralization, and an end to corruption were at the core of the protests,<sup>11</sup> scholars point out that erstwhile apolitical participants shifted toward anti-capitalist goals under the influence of left-wing feminists and environmentalists as the movement developed.<sup>12</sup> The self-portrayal of one of the youth groups summarizes the structure of feeling in Spain: “without a house, without work, without pension,” and therefore “without fear.”<sup>13</sup>

Even though these Western uprisings attacked capitalism much more openly, the distinctiveness and alleged political maturity and superiority of the West was put into question by the revolts and their aftermath, as they exposed expanding police states whose techniques spilled over from “the war on terror” to a war against chunks of Western citizenries. Egyptian revolutionaries titled one of their open letters in 2013 “From Taksim and Rio to Tahrir, the smell of teargas.”<sup>14</sup> They could well have added Wall Street to the list.

## Tunisia and Egypt

The Arab protests should be evaluated not in terms of the Arabs’ essential cultural differences, but of the structural position each country holds

10 Greig Charnock, Thomas Purcell, and Ramon Ribera-Fumaz, “Indignate!: The 2011 Popular Protests and the Limits to Democracy in Spain,” *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 7-9.

11 Ibid., 3-11

12 Carlos Taibo, 2013, “The Spanish Indignados: A Movement with Two Souls,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 20: 155-58.

13 Charnock et al., “Indignate!,” 4.

14 <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/from-tahrir-and-rio-to-taksim-the-smell-of-teargas/>.

in a (contingently articulated) *chain* of international and transnational relations.<sup>15</sup> In two Arab countries, Western-supported dictatorships and their neoliberal development programs collapsed, and their restoration has so far been bumpy. Unlike in the case of the US and Turkey, industrial labor was a crucial part of the story, even though it was not a part of an articulated coalition, let alone the leader of such a coalition.<sup>16</sup>

In Tunisia, middle-class youth as well as organized labor occupied the town squares until the downfall of the dictator. Labor mobilization persisted after it became clear that the conservative forces that replaced the dictator intended to pursue the same economic policies.

By contrast, the Tahrir occupation was heavily middle-class. The impact of labor was greater away from Tahrir, especially in the industrial towns of Mahalla and Tanta. Tahrir's revolutionary youth and Mahalla and Tanta's independent labor were in dialogue, but their actions and platforms were not always well coordinated. As a result, social justice issues resulting from commodification were among the top items on the agenda of the uprising, but demands addressing the commodification of labor, health, education, and housing could not be formulated. According to some analysts,<sup>17</sup> the commodification of urban space, and especially of the informal, poor settlements, was one of the causes of revolt. Even so, this issue was not properly politicized or linked to the commodification of labor and social goods—a linkage that could have changed the course of the revolt.

This uneven centrality of labor's commodification to Arab protests is partly related to the continued importance of industrial towns in countries such as Egypt, in contrast to their near-extinction in world capitalism's core countries. Future comparative research could explore why Turkish modernizers of the 1980s to 2000s were able to break labor's geographical concentration while Egypt's neoliberal modernizers were not. Another question for further research is why labor's demands and related (but less popular) issues of commodification were gradually pushed to the margins of the Egyptian revolutionary agenda. One quick and obvious hypothesis is the centrality of the much more fatal and immediate questions of old regime and Muslim Brotherhood authoritarianisms and the low level of alternative political organization due to decades of dictatorship.

15 On the need to analyze specific countries with a structural logic as "links" in a "chain," see Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (London: Verso, 1974).

16 Joel Beinin, "Workers' Protest in Egypt: Neo-liberalism and Class Struggle in 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Social Movement Studies* 8, no. 4 (2009): 449-54.

17 For an overview, see Éric Verdeil, "Arab Cities in Revolution: Some Observations," *Metropolitiques.eu*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Arab-Cities-in-Revolution-Some.html>.

In spite of these and other problems, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts mark a world-historical turning point: their quick (though only apparent) success popularized “occupation” at a global level. What struck a chord was not only the political effectiveness of this type of action but also the temporary communal life experienced on the “liberated” town square. Once restricted to mostly continental European anarchist circles, the idea of taking over what should anyway be common space became a standard aspect of the global repertoire of protest.

### Brazil

The revolt in Brazil is certainly one of the most interesting comparison cases with the Turkish one, since the country occupies a similar structural position in world capitalism as an economic and political (but in this case social-liberal, rather than straightforwardly neoliberal) success story. How could a big social eruption occur in what appeared to be a happily liberalizing country?

Brazil, like Turkey, demonstrates how stifling the heaven promised by liberalism is. The dynamics that triggered the revolt in Brazil were specifically urban.<sup>18</sup> The social-liberal Brazilian government heavily subsidized the acquisition of automobiles without proper developments in urban infrastructure. Public transportation suffered under Brazilian social liberalism. São Paulo, with its population of 11 million, was home to 7 million registered vehicles in 2011. Congestion became unbearable in major cities.

In this context, the classic squatter movements with their demands centered on water, electricity, and sewage gave way to the cross-class politics of transportation. A rise in bus fares was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

The pattern was very similar to that in Turkey. Urban rights issues kicked off the protests. Once the bus fare protesters met with police violence, events escalated. Millions were soon on the streets and protests focused on multiple issues: corruption, frustration with the ruling party, police violence, and even sexual rights (a quite similar grievance list to the one in Turkey).

When the middle classes rose up to protest the evils of privatization and police violence, the working classes sarcastically reminded them of their habitual quiescence. Yet they did so *during their participation in the protests*, rather than holding back from the revolt. In contrast to

18 Teresa Caldeira, “São Paulo: The City and its Protests: Teresa Caldeira,” *kafila.org*, July 5, 2013, <http://kafila.org/2013/07/05/sao-paulo-the-city-and-its-protests-teresa-caldeira/>.

Istanbul, the participation of the squatters and their children was more sustained. Why was this not the case in Istanbul, except temporarily, in Alevi neighborhoods?<sup>19</sup>

This comparative question can lead to fruitful research, especially as events unfold in both countries. Here, I will only suggest that popular Sunni allegiance to the regime during the Gezi revolt might be indicative of the depth of hegemony in Turkey in contrast to Brazil.<sup>20</sup> Although issues of redistribution (and even rights to the city, commodification, and authoritarianism) failed to reshuffle political and ideological alliances in Turkey. Hegemony survived the days of June 2013, although it suffered heavy blows.

Much like in other revolutionary waves, 2009-2013 expressed discontent with broad global affairs and structures, despite its focus on national conditions. Unlike almost all former revolutionary waves, however, 2009-2013 did not have a unifying ideology or program. In that, it was closest to the Eastern European rebellions of 1989.

Yet, 2009-2013 was also quite distinct from 1989, as it expressed the crisis of the hegemonic world order, rather than reinforcing it.

### **The crisis of the hegemons: At the threshold of an ungovernable world**

Here, I use the term hegemony in the broadest sense possible. I take my cues from Arrighian world systems analysis<sup>21</sup> as well as cultural sociology. A global capitalist order is hegemonic when there is cross-national consent (backed by force) for a core economic model (on which there might be national and regional variations) and its (contested) political and cultural implications. This consent is contingently articulated to global and regional territorial balances. Despite the increasing significance of nongovernmental institutions, states have been the main (but by no means the only significant) actors of this articulation.<sup>22</sup> Ever since World War II, the United States has been at the center of this game.

19 It should also be noted that cuts to education spending did not become an issue in Turkey, though the cuts became a major point of contention in Brazil. In Turkey, education is a highly politicized issue, with secular nationalists on one end of the spectrum and conservatives on the other, and it is difficult to re-politicize this issue in terms of redistribution.

20 See Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); and Erdem Yörük, "Brazil, Turkey: Emerging Markets, Emerging Riots," *jadaliyya.com*, July 21, 2013, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/contributors/147368>.

21 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

22 The game of articulation might have different leading actors on different scales. For the national scale, see Cedric De Leon, Manali Desai and Cihan Tuğal, "Political Articulation: Parties and the Constitution of Cleavages in the United States, India, and Turkey," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 3 (2009): 193-219.

Yet, the United States has been turning away from consent to coercion in its external as well as internal affairs. The number of wars and victims of war, the intensity of war-related torture, etc., have been on the rise. Internally too, the government has been increasing repression of its own citizens, even over non-war related issues. The techniques of repression travel from one sphere to the other. Telephone tapping, personal data collection on the Internet, extralegal IRS audits, etc., are becoming routine measures (not only against Occupy activists, but even conservatives and Tea Party figures).

The US is also having a difficult time lining up its Western allies behind its projects for war and repression, though most of them participate willy-nilly in these efforts, as well as in the “war on terrorism.” Consent is weaker outside the Western world, where wars and torture breed more than distrust. The world is becoming ungovernable.

These political-military problems have their economic counterparts: as in other hegemonic crises, the leading power has been turning away from productive growth to financially driven growth. Production and technological innovation are shifting to non-Western regions of the world in an uneven fashion. The processes alluded to in the sections above (real estate bubbles, especially in the United States and other Western countries, privatization and accumulation by dispossession, particularly in non-Western regions, etc.) unfold against this background of financialization (which is, again, unevenly distributed throughout the world order). The American economy has started to disproportionately count on either financial or real estate bubbles, or a combination of the two.<sup>23</sup> As seen in the 2008 crisis, while this speculative model of growth bestows dynamism on the economy for a while, it then leads to shock waves throughout the world’s economies. As a result, the United States and other Western powers are no longer the world’s unquestionable leaders of economic growth. In short, the political-military crisis of the hegemon is articulated to its economic crisis.

The so-called “Turkish model” was a lifesaver in these troubled times. Global hegemonic powers hoped that the new regime in Turkey would spread the practice of and belief in the American way in military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural venues throughout its region and the Muslim world. With its (perceived) economic miracle (in which financialization has not yet led to as serious a crisis as in the American one), marriage of religion and liberal-authoritarian democracy, and participa-

23 Robert Brenner, “New Boom or New Bubble? The Trajectory of the US Economy,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 57-100.

tion in the Greater Middle East Project, Turkey served all of these purposes. The Arab spring further fueled the hope that the new democracies in the Middle East would rush to imitate Turkey's Atlanticist path.

However, the realities on the ground turned out to be much more complex. Regional hegemony is still reshuffling, especially since regional actors perceive a power gap. Rather than sheepishly following a straightforwardly Atlanticist Turkey, the Islamic movements and organizations in the region learn selectively from Turkey's success,<sup>24</sup> engaging in multiple and shifting coalitions with regional powers—not all of them in line with global hegemony, let alone with Turkey's specific interests. In sum, despite Turkey's insistent projection of itself as a hegemon (and its leaders' and intellectuals' deep and sincere belief in their historical mission in this regard), Muslim/Arab allegiance to Turkish military-political leadership is weak and consent for the Turkish model is shaky.

Just like in the case of the United States, Turkey's imperial overreach is intensifying coercion at home. This became all the more obvious in early 2013: As the new regime's imperial project reached its limits, it ratcheted up police repression. Police violence, one of the main catalyzers of the Gezi protests, reached its peak right after the Turkish Prime Minister's trip to the United States, where he attempted one last time, in vain, to push Western powers to take a more bellicose role in Syria.

As the hegemons turn from consent to coercion, anti-authoritarian and antiwar protests spread, and are likely to spread further. Depending on the national context and the timing, anti-commodification protests have been (again contingently) articulated to anti-authoritarian protests. What still remains to be seen is whether the crisis of the global hegemon and the regional hegemons is terminal (as most world systems analysts argue) or conjunctural.

In searching for an answer to this question, it will help to unpack counter-systemic class dynamics in some of the cases. Here, I will do this for only one regional hegemon, Turkey. Partially based on the analysis of the contradictions of the Turkish petty bourgeoisie in the next section, the essay's last section will suggest that even though we are heading toward a decaying hegemony, the constitution of a new world order is not yet in sight.

### **Social composition of the revolters in Turkey**

Who are the carriers of this global revolt against commodification and authoritarianism? This essay will offer some suggestive answers in light

24 See Cihan Tuğal, "Fight or Acquiesce? Religion and Political Process in Turkey's and Egypt's Neoliberalizations," *Development and Change* 43, no. 1 (2012): 23-51.

of the Turkish example, which is significant both because Turkey is a regional hegemon and because its revolt was quite unexpected as the country was considered an economic and political success story.

At this point, we know little about the exact composition of the revolters. The few surveys that have been circulating have little scientific credibility; most of the other evidence is anecdotal and based on eyewitness accounts. Still, a vague picture emerges from this fragmented body of evidence. It seems that from May 28 to May 31, as the numbers of protesters climbed from hundreds to thousands, a crushing majority consisted of professionals. Then, the masses that flooded Taksim became much more heterogeneous, with especially informal proletarians from Gaziosmanpaşa and Ümraniye arriving in big numbers. For the following two weeks, the class heterogeneity persisted, and became even more complex with massive protests in informal proletarian districts (1 Mayıs Mahallesi, Gazi, Okmeydanı, Alibeyköy) as well as established elite zones (Etiler, Nişantaşı, Bağdad Caddesi, etc.). After the security forces had emptied Gezi Park and Taksim Square in mid-June, the only formal proletarian demonstration within the June revolt took place on June 17, organized by DİSK and KESK, but it attracted very small numbers, and protests also stopped in informal proletarian regions. At this point, the Gezi movement changed track and focused on organizing popular assemblies (*forums* in Turkish). Despite the low level of expectation, thousands of people in two key middle class district centers (Beşiktaş and Kadıköy) participated in the assemblies, while only dozens regularly attended them in elite and informal proletarian neighborhoods.

Although we shouldn't rush to conclusions at what may be an early point in the movement, these tendencies hint that professionals not only led the movement, but also constituted the core of the participants. Despite analyses to the contrary, the Gezi Resistance appears to be an occasionally multi-class, but predominantly middle-class movement. Certainly, we need much more information for a fuller analysis, but labeling the Gezi revolt as the movement of the proletarianized middle-class or the white-collar working class<sup>25</sup> stands on shakier ground than analyses that emphasize the middle class core. Generously paid professionals who have some control over production and services (even though they may not have ownership), rather than white-collar proletarians (such as waitresses, salesclerks, subordinate office clerks, etc.) seem to predominate. Further research and new developments after mid-August 2013

25 See Korkut Boratav, "Olgunlaşmış bir sınıfsal başkaldırı...", *sendika.org*, June 22, 2013, <http://www.sendika.org/2013/06/her-yer-taksim-her-yer-direnis-bu-isci-sinifinin-tarihsel-ozlemi-olan-sinirsiz-dolaysiz-demokrasi-cagrisidir-korkut-boratav/>.

may complicate the class map of the revolt. In any case, however, the novelty of intense participation by well-paid and fashionably dressed professionals constitutes a puzzle well worth exploring.

What accounts for the professionals' heavy participation in such a risky revolt? Exploitation, (socioeconomic) marginalization, impoverishment, and other categories that emphasize the process of production and/or the redistribution of resources cannot tell us much. A good chunk of today's Turkish professionals have experienced upward mobility throughout their lives. Their life standards are (or promise to be) incomparably higher than their parents. As importantly, it is dubious whether they would benefit or be harmed by an egalitarian redistribution of resources throughout the country. In that sense, they do not resemble the "fearless" Spanish youth who portray themselves as "without a house, without work, without pension." The occasional fearlessness of the protesters in Turkey is a scholarly challenge in this regard.

What really hurts this class is not exploitation and impoverishment in absolute economic terms, I suggest, but the impoverishment of social life. Free market capitalism has actually delivered them its promises: lucrative jobs, luxurious vacations, fancy cars, (at least the prospect of) comfortable homes, and many other forms of conspicuous consumption. Yet, none of this has resulted in fulfilling lives.

The Gezi movement provided a non-commodified space (the barricades, the public park, the shared meals) where this class momentarily tasted the fruits of a solidaristic life. Whatever social ties existed in the life of these professionals was transparently "social capital": these social ties were not only convertible to economic capital and upward mobility in their professions; they were established with the semi-explicit goal of being converted to such "cash" at some point. What the revolt provided was the pleasure of social ties for the sake of social ties; that is, the revolt starkly demonstrated to these sectors that a different world, in which pleasure was not based on commodities but interpersonal ties, was possible. This is why hundreds of thousands of people stuck to their park for twenty days, and then thousands attended the assemblies for another month.

I will also suggest here that the universe that received a heavy ideological and practical blow during the Gezi revolt was not the world of classes, strata, and inequalities in general, but the dominant world of commodities. There were certainly socialist groups and (formal and informal) workers who joined the revolt to pursue a class war. But this was far from being at the top of the agenda of the revolt (though it was continuously on the mind of the government and its allies). Even though a

non-commodified space momentarily redistributes resources among its participants (witness the many street kids who led a more honorable life as long as the popular assemblies were well attended), it does not necessarily result in an egalitarian world *beyond the revolt's spatial boundaries*. The common talk of the virtues and pleasures of sharing and solidarity among the Gezi activists did not (and at this point, could not) find any parallels in the shape of a common talk about the virtues of nation-wide equality (on the contrary, the nonsocialist participants frequently voiced their contempt for the “ignorant” lower classes who kept on voting for the governing party).

I encountered what could be called a class-blindness among the participants of the assemblies, the overwhelming majority of whom were engineers, lawyers, doctors, media and social media experts, real estate experts, or finance professionals. Those without any social science and/or socialist/Marxist training looked down on the lower classes and/or talked about the need to “go to” the lower classes and enlighten them about the evils of the governing regime (that had allegedly “bought” their votes with coal and food, a folk analysis oft-repeated on the stage of the assemblies and in the working groups and committees). Those with more sociological or socialist training avoided such reductionism, but instead insisted that they (as white collar workers) also were a part of the working class and hence there was no real distinction between them and the workers, who the nonsocialist participants talked of as “they”.

Yet, at the same time, some of the engineers who work in the public sector are facing proletarianization. They have less and less control over their profession. And the government wants to take away more control. Dissatisfied, some switch to jobs with lower pay but more control. So, possibly, there are (at least) two new middle-class fractions that participate in the movement. The better off and the more secure could be called the aristocracy of the new middle class; the underdogs could be called the “precariat” of the same class, if this concept is redefined as the precarious fractions *within* each class, rather than a class distinct from the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But who is in the majority in the Gezi revolt?

Future surveys on Gezi could ask people not only their jobs but also try to assess job prospects and control over the productive process in order to gauge whether some of these sectors constituted a larger contingent in specific nodes of the movement (for instance, those in Gezi Park vs. those in Taksim Square vs. the less organized, fleeting participants). It is possible that those in the park were largely from the aristocracy of the new petty bourgeoisie (hence differentiating the Turkish case

from the Spanish and the American revolts, where the precariat seemed to predominate, though conclusive research is lacking in these cases as well).

This new middle-class character of the movement certainly constitutes a strength in a country where the lower classes are reduced to silence through force and consent. However, this also renders the movement a quite restricted one that, by its very nature, is bound to have limited effects on the macro structures of the country. There are solid structural-class elements that prevent this movement from spreading institutionally from middle class neighborhoods to proletarian strata and regions.

A careful analysis of this Turkish social group's dispositions can constitute a basis for a deepening of the general theory of the new petty bourgeoisie (and the movements in which it predominates) too. We first need to realize that commodification (of labor, everyday life, and nature) has produced a quite monotonous life for this class—a monotony which it has broken thanks to the Gezi revolt. Yet, at the same time, many fractions of this class have directly or indirectly benefited from the commodification of the last three decades; they can easily renew their coalitions with the current order, even in the sphere of the commodification of urban space (which incited the revolt to begin with).

Another difficulty the movement faces has to do with the cultural (rather than economic) dispositions of this class. The new petty bourgeoisie of our day (perhaps unlike the same class as analyzed by Poulantzas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) has strongly participatory and anti-authoritarian tendencies (though its anti-authoritarianism can go in individualist as well as collectivist directions). This fosters a movement culture where discussion for the pleasure of discussion can trump the formation of programmatic goals. This, added to other linguistic and cultural differences between this class and the proletarian and sub-proletarian sections of society, renders the movement less sympathetic among broader popular sectors. While the movement found some echo in working class Alevi neighborhoods, it remains to be seen whether it can sustain its novelty, new middle-class backing, and emphasis on urban space, commodification, and nature if it spreads to these regions in a more structured way.

Polanyi argued that, during the age of classical liberalism, the aristocracy rose to be the defender of land (and by implication nature) against commodification. Yet, it was also a staunch defender of its own privileges and therefore prone to authoritarian (and ultimately fascist) responses to commodification. The new middle class, rather than the remnants of the aristocracy of yesteryear, occupies a similar contradictory position in

our age. In the case of Turkey, it has stepped up to the defense of shared urban space (and the urbanized nature within); in the “Western” cases, it fought against the commodification of money; in the Arab cases, it directly challenged authoritarianism, while frequently bringing in the issue of labor. Still, given its (unevenly distributed) privileges, we cannot be certain about what kinds of political solutions this class will support in the future.

Ignoring the class nature of the Gezi movement automatically shuts off a discussion about the lack of massive proletarian and sub-proletarian participation. Hence, if we stick to the illusion that Gezi is a working class movement, we cannot theorize the reason why there is no organized class alliance in the body of the movement. Therefore, the position that the professionals are one segment of the working class locks us up in a theoretical cage, as Poulantzas has already pointed out.<sup>26</sup>

More significantly, the restricted and restrictive class character of the movement brings us to a deeper problem: its inability (at least, at this point) to offer alternatives to the current order. The umbrella organization that attempted to give some direction to the movement, Taksim Dayanışması (Taksim Solidarity), distinguished the Gezi revolt from those in Spain and the United States, which remained “leaderless” throughout (at least on paper, if not in actual practice). Yet, even this organization, which was a coalition of social movement organizations and socialist groups with at times conflicting agendas, was unable to formulate a roadmap towards a more democratic and de-commodified world.

As I finalized this essay in mid-August 2013, the park assemblies in Istanbul had just started to work towards a new platform that would represent the assemblies throughout the city. The coming months will show whether the coordination among the assemblies will amount to a historical, collective will.

### Results and prospects

It is too early to draw a conclusive balance sheet of this revolutionary wave. Nevertheless, some initial observations are possible. Also, we need to note the problems with the straightforward dismissals and the blind romanticizations of the current wave. This inconclusive evaluation will also allow us to note the specific strengths and weaknesses of the Gezi Revolt in comparison to its sisters.

Despite sustained mobilization, the Greek government keeps attacking common goods. For example, public television was recently privat-

26 Nicos Poulantzas, “The New Petty Bourgeoisie,” *Critical Sociology* 9 (1979): 56-60.

ized, a move met by huge protests. In mid-July 2013, the government's new austerity measures were met with new protests, though these were not as well-attended as those in 2011. The Greek case shows that even massive mobilization for several years does not guarantee the slowing down of neo-liberalization, especially when the latter is aggressively backed by foreign powers (in this case, the EU).<sup>27</sup>

The results in Spain are not more encouraging. The revolt initially led to high-level resignations, but the following elections brought to power more determined enemies of the movement. Still, it is not clear that this can be judged a failure of the movement itself, since its participants emphasized that they did not care who won the elections;<sup>28</sup> an abstentionism that clearly marks off the Indignados not only from Gezi but from the Greek protestors as well.

Nevertheless, Spanish abstentionism was not as rigid as the American variety. The American Occupiers refused to formulate any demands, whereas the Indignados proposed several reform measures on issues as diverse as labor market reform, military spending, housing rights, and banking regulation (though it should be noted that such demands for reform did not fit squarely with their calls to boycott elections and distrust all existing parties). Perhaps more importantly, they experimented with direct democratic ways of formulating these demands through park assemblies.

In the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, the results were outright disheartening. The revolts first brought to power new authoritarian (and culturally more conservative) actors committed to further commodification. When the Egyptian mobilization insisted on its egalitarian and democratic goals, it was hijacked by old regime forces. The military carried out a coup in the name of the revolution, renewed Egypt's allegiance to the world and regional order, and then massacred thousands of conservatives (who also claimed, in as suspicious a fashion, that they represented the revolution).

Some observers emphasize the defeats of the current wave, and not simply that the movements did not change electoral results: for instance, in Spain, unemployment, poverty, and inequality actually increased after the mobilization.<sup>29</sup> Others, a bigger crowd in the academy, celebrate the victories: the spread of egalitarian practices, they hold, is more impor-

27 On a related note, Syriza's defeat in the elections is a good warning to those who expect too much from elections in Turkey, where the socialists and communists are not as strong.

28 Hughes, "Young People Took to the Streets," 411.

29 Abdullah Ayan, "İspanya Öfkeliiler hareketinden çıkarılacak dersler," *ufukturu.net*, June 10, 2013, <http://www.ufukturu.net/haberler/28767/ispanya-ofkeliler-hareketinden-cikarilacak-dersler>.

tant than the consolidation of an egalitarian program and the realization of its demands.<sup>30</sup>

While the critics miss the novelty of the 2011 revolt (and therefore the need to devise a new measuring stick of success), the romantics neglect the persistence of overall global and national hegemonic structures. If inequality, unemployment, commodification of urban space and other shared resources, and authoritarianism persist or increase in the coming years, we cannot simply restrict ourselves to eulogizing this global revolt. We also need to be clear about its shortcomings.

Following how the Gezi revolt unfolds will be important in this regard. A part of the same global wave, Gezi shares many of the strengths and weaknesses of its sister revolts. However, unlike the American revolt, the Gezi movement has so far not shied away from formulating demands and (unlike the Spanish one) deploying established channels to push for them. In this process, the movement has also brought into being organizational forms specific to itself (most important of all Taksim Solidarity), which might inspire other revolts to craft “leaderful” and pluralistic organizations that do not contradict the spirit of the anti-authoritarian 2011 wave.

Taksim Solidarity has not worked any miracles, but it has so far prevented the movement from being hijacked by nationalists and old regime forces as in Egypt (an ever-present danger in Turkey too). Its formulation of specific demands has also prevented various forms of adventurism (though its cautious attitude also gave rise to criticism and anger among the ranks of the non-organized youth). Furthermore, partially due to the focused approach of the leadership, the movement has so far prevented further construction on Taksim Square. Time will tell if the movement and its organizations will be able to claim more solid and macro-structural gains. It is also unclear at this point how the more directly democratic popular assemblies will develop, or how Taksim Solidarity (or any other citywide leadership emerging from the coordination of the assemblies) will incorporate their feedback. Whatever the results, the Gezi experience will provide rich information for comparative analyses of movement organization in our anarchistic era.

30 Erik Swyngedouw, “Every Revolution Has Its Square,” *cities@manchester* (blog), March 18, 2011, <http://citiesmcr.wordpress.com/2011/03/18/every-revolution-has-its-square/>; Yavuz Yıldırım, “Kent Aracılığı ile Ortak Olanı Kurmak: ‘Öfkeli’ ve ‘İşgal Et’ Hareketleri,” *Mülkiye Dergisi* 37, no. 1 (2013): 143-62.