On the Political Economy of the Gezi Revolt in Turkey

Özgür Öztürk - How Class Works 2014 Conference
I will try to emphasize the class content of the Gezi revolt and the political economy behind it. It is the most important mass political “event” in the last 30 years of Turkey. With Gezi, a new generation of activists came on the historical scene. It is almost certain that this will produce long term and permanent effects on Turkish politics.
The Gezi Park

The revolt started as a *resistance* against a new construction project near the Taksim Square.
The proposed construction project
When the municipality attempted to cut a few trees, at first just a small group protested.

The trees defended by the protesters
Protests everywhere

Within a few days, there were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets.
At this point, the resistance turned into a country-wide *uprising* which lasted for about a month in all the urban centers.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, more than 2.5 million people participated in the protests.

In total, more than eight thousand people got injured and eight young protesters died because of the police violence.
FRIENDS ARE LOOKING AT US!
Dominant Views:

There are many interpretations about the Gezi revolt. But we can roughly classify them in three groups:

• Conservatives

• Liberals

• Nationalists
1. Conservatives

Those that support the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) can be called as conservatives.

But it will be a waste of time if we deal with these interpretations. Since, these are mostly conspiracy theories produced as part of a counter-attack against the protesters.
2. Liberals

Secondly, we have liberals and left-liberals. This view is very widespread in the media. The liberals like to emphasize the “spontaneous, unorganized and middle-class” character of Gezi. This interpretation is basically descriptive.
Taksim Square – June 2013
Liberals try to *describe* the event by the use of loose sociological categories. They use the term “middle-class” as descriptive.

In fact, most of the people whom they refer to as middle-class are in fact working class people.
Taksim Square – June 15, 2013
The liberals: this was a libertarian movement against authoritarianism (an “insurrection for dignity”). Thus, it basically included political not economical demands.

Women, environmentalists, lesbian and gay activists, the Alevite minority ... etc. many people collectively responded to the authoritarian rule of the AKP.
This is correct as a description, but not enough.

In fact, one can produce an endless list of participants: even the soccer fans were an important component of Gezi.
It is striking that these two dominant but opposing views (conservatives and liberals) share one common premise: Economy and politics are distinct domains of life, with ideally no interaction in between.

According to them, the AKP was “successful” in managing the economy.
However, these two views diverge when it comes to the “political style” of Tayyip Erdoğan.

For liberals, the demand was very simple and easy to solve: Let the Gezi Park stay as what it is!

They think that it is absurd to refuse simple democratic demands.
The liberals think that neoliberalism is possible in Turkey without this excess provided by Erdoğan’s style. They cannot see that capitalism as a concrete system can function only through such “irrationalities”.

Secondly, these two views (liberals and conservatives) both accept that the electoral success of the AKP is proof that it manages the economy successfully.

According to them, the elections reflect the preferences of the people. Hence, a revolt as massive as Gezi cannot be the result of economic reasons.
But: In capitalist society, elections are a means for the ruling class to sustain its power.

When people fight on the streets, this shows their discontent with the existing system as a whole.
3. Nationalists

The right and left nationalists accept that Gezi was the response of “the people” to the Islamist, reactionary and pro-imperialist government. It was basically a healthy national reflex. And all the libertarian sections of the people that want a modern life participated the protests.
Though they also think that the basis of the revolt was not economical but political, the nationalists are more ready to accept the interaction between the economy and politics. However, they conceptualize politics only in terms of national identities. In this view, there are no classes, but progressives who are nationalists and reactionaries who are not. This is idealistic.
In short, the three dominant views ignore the political economy dimension behind the revolt and focus on surface appearances. They simply and deliberately ignore the class content.
By contrast, I will argue that the majority of the “core elements” of Gezi were young working-class people, struggling via non-traditional forms of organization and political action.
Moreover: Gezi was a moment of truth.

The truth is that the neoliberal model that marked the last 30 years of Turkey is unsustainable today.

It is economically, politically and socially unsustainable.

This, I think, is a proper Marxist interpretation.
Gezi was certainly a spontaneous event.

However, on a deeper level, what is at stake is the failure of the neoliberal model that included repressive social and political practices.
This does not mean that we need another, more human version of capitalism.

On the contrary, the basic demand of the Gezi revolt, that is, direct democracy, implies the abolition of the distinction between economy and politics that is characteristic of capitalism.
I think it is symptomatic that just prior to Gezi the AKP seemed very strong. It seemed as if the AKP had managed to contain the effects of the global crisis. And there was an overall success during the AKP era.
Growth of the Turkish Economy (1999-2013)
For example, it is a fact that per capita GDP increased from three thousand dollars in 2001 to more than ten thousand dollars in the last decade.
But, the picture was not so bright on the other side.

For example, in terms of income distribution, the situation of the poorest strata was getting worse.
<table>
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<th>Years</th>
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<th>Second 20%</th>
<th>Third 20%</th>
<th>Fourth 20%</th>
<th>Last 20%</th>
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<td>14.8</td>
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<td>10.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
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<td>2008</td>
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All my data are taken from Turkstat, and may include a serious pro-government bias. However, the trends are clear. Moreover, this high growth clearly depended on foreign capital entry and external debt.
Or in terms of employment, the fast growth of the AKP years did not translate into a decrease in the overall rate of unemployment.
Many economists jump from this data to the conclusion that it was a kind of jobless growth. But I think this is not the correct term. The growth is not jobless, it is “jobby” in fact.

The agricultural sector is shrinking and there is a very fast proletarianisation in the cities.
As of today, more than two-thirds of the residents in Istanbul are wage earners. The real problem is the deterioration in the conditions of work. As a result, unemployment is more a problem of the educated youth, that is, for those whose expectations are “high”.
Source: Turkstat
Roughly, unemployment rate is %10.

Youth unemployment rate is 50 percent higher than this, that is %15.

But unemployment rate is two times more for the university graduates, that is 30 percent!
Again, these are Turkstat figures and the real situation is certainly worse than this.

If you’re ready to work with a low wage, for long hours and in very bad conditions, you can find a job.

The disaster in the Soma coal mine just proved this. Even these miners were forced to vote for the AKP in order to get a job!
To this picture, we can add the increasing debt on the part of workers:

The number of people who couldn’t pay consumer credit debt back increased from 169 thousand in 2009 to 464 thousand in 2013.

Similarly, those who defaulted on credit card debt were 618 thousand people last year.
Consumer credit debt:

2009: 169,000
2013: 464,000

Credit card debt:

2009: 272,000
2013: 618,000
I don’t want to say that the Gezi Revolt happened just because of these so-called economical reasons.

Any political event has its own dynamic and causality.

However, neoliberalism simply worsened the condition of the masses.
Marxists usually employ the concept of “neoliberal authoritarian state” taken from Nicos Poulantzas.

I think we must add a social component to this concept. Neoliberalism does not just bring political transformations, but also social arrangements.
In the Turkish context, this came out as conservative ideology and Islamism.

A politically repressive regime, trying to sustain itself by means of conservative social arrangements.
But the determining component is neoliberalism, which includes: 1. low wages, 2. harsh working conditions, 3. privatizations, 4. generalized sub-contracting, 5. insecure, informal work, 6. “internationalization of capital”, 7. increasing commodification, 8. increasing destruction of nature, 9. increasing destruction of peasant life.
Such a regime is only possible through repressive political and conservative social policies. This is a victory on the part of the bourgeoisie.
Yet, there are contradictions within these three components also.

A religious outlook may contradict with capitalist imperatives (e.g. the anti-capitalist muslims in Gezi); or it may demand justice.
Increasing internationalization also brings a cosmopolitan outlook on the part of the working class.

On one hand you promote tourism and foreign capital, and on the other you try to ban alcohol consumption!

It is simply impossible to manage a neoliberal country with a provincial outlook.
Gezi was the explosion of these contradictions – social, economic and political.

The Gezi revolt was not confined to Istanbul. In all the cities, young socialists, university students and Alevites were at the front.
The “core element” of the revolt was clearly socialist.

These were mostly young workers, university students and the Alevites – all a part of the working class.
They were not unorganized, as the liberals claim. On the contrary, there were lots of socialist parties and organizations on the front. Behind them, there was a large group of relatively more passive participants. However, these also were organized in various ways.
Yet the forms of organization were non-traditional.

Types of political action were also non-traditional.

For example, soccer fan groups were very active.
The basic demand was direct democracy.

The park forums clearly implied such a necessity.

Organization within the Gezi commune also implied this need.
Smart phone, social media and a gas mask;
The social media creates new forms of sociality.
I think it is not an exaggeration to claim that:

After 2.5 thousand years, we are at a position to think about direct democracy again.
Gezi was a moment in the struggle for an egalitarian and democratic society.

It showed us that this is possible only by overcoming capitalism.
Thank you very much...