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Chapter 10: The Activist Chroniclers of Occupy Gezi: Counterposing Visibility to Injustice

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Abstract

With the benefit of hindsight, this chapter casts another glance at Occupy Gezi, a landmark protest in contemporary Turkey. We reflect on the pursuit of visibility by activists on Twitter as a means to garner the attention of the Turkish and the global public to the heavy-handed police crackdown of the popular mobilization. We interpret their quest for visibility as a subaltern tactic employed to reverse an asymmetry of power through an aesthetics of indignation at the injustice perpetrated against peaceful demonstrators. In the longer run, however, such visibility poses an important dilemma when, as in the case of Turkey, it becomes the basis for reflexive state surveillance.

Introduction

In 2013, Occupy Gezi became a milestone in contemporary Turkish history and politics. The protest was an expression of participatory democracy understood as a desire for more immediate and efficacious collective input in democratic governance (della Porta, 2013a). At the same time, it was an outcry against the erosion of Turkish democracy. Its institutions, including the mainstream media (Karatas and Saka, 2017) commanded decreasing levels of trust (Konda, 2014) while being increasingly hollowed out by a mix of neoliberal policies and the authoritarian tendencies of the Erdoğan government (İğsız, 2014).

The reflections that follow focus on the period between late May and late June 2013. In the final days of May, protestors embarked on a quest for visibility on Twitter to garner the attention of the Turkish and the global public to the heavy-handed police crackdown of early peaceful demonstrations by environmental activists (Budak and Watts, 2015). The protests followed a procedural court challenge to government plans to erect the ‘Taksim Military Barracks’, a building complex that included shopping and residential units alongside military facilities (Demirhan, 2014). The plans would have seen the de facto privatization of Gezi (İğsız, 2014: 28), a metropolitan park that would sit at the heart of the redevelopment site. They evolved into a struggle for recognition and participation: a recognition of the stake that urban residents have in the democratic governance of the environment they inhabit, which they can seek to assert through the courts, within the bounds of the rule-of-law. Recognition was further sought for the democratic right to participate in a non-violent revolt against the expanding authoritarianism of the then Prime-Minister Erdoğan’s government that was subjugating the country’s judicial, political and media institutions (İğsız, 2014).

Over the course of two weeks of rolling protests, tweeting compensated for the anaemic coverage of the Gezi occupation by Turkish media. Twitter was used strategically to draw in the global media and help choreograph collective action (Mercea et al., 2018). The visibility thus attained publicized the pursuit of procedural, environmental and social justice (Schlosberg, 2007) by the swelling number of politically, socio-economically and culturally diverse protestors (see Vatikiotis and Yörük, 2016). The jarring aesthetics of police violence perpetrated against activists was

channeled through an injustice frame so as to emphasize the democratic character, means and goals of the protests.

In what follows, we argue that this quest for visibility is an example of a subaltern tactic (Certeau, 1984) to reverse an asymmetry of power using an injustice frame. In the short run, this tactic can serve that very goal by subjecting governments to extraordinary levels of global, public scrutiny. In the longer run, however, it poses an important dilemma as it can become a basis for reflexive state surveillance. On the one hand, for the diverse assembly of protestors in the Gezi Park, the official government response to the mobilization was portrayed as state repression by dint of a rallying injustice frame. Following the eviction of the encampment, Twitter was used to memorialize ‘the Gezi spirit’ so as to preserve and continue to make visible the democratic ethos and values of the movement and its legacy (Mercea et al., 2018). On the other hand, this act of resistance prompted a reflexive turn in state surveillance. In 2014, legislation was passed tightening the Turkish government’s control of the internet at the same time as rampant state monitoring of social media was aimed at silencing dissident voices (Karatas and Saka, 2017: 387). Despite rejoicing in a newly-found solidarity during the occupation, participants that memorialized the protests by continuing to post about them on Twitter, struggled to preserve its legacy in the volatile political climate of the country since 2013 (Mercea et al., 2018). Below, we first discuss injustice frames and their use by activists around the world to raise the visibility of aggrieved groups.

A path to visibility

We derive the term ‘injustice frame’ from the tradition of frame analysis in social movements (for an overview, see Benford and Snow, 2000). Snow et al. (1986: 466) built on Goffman’s (1974:21) notion of the frame, defined as “schemata of interpretation” whereby one can make sense of the world around them to characterize an injustice frame as: “a mode of interpretation that defines the actions of an authority system as unjust and simultaneously legitimates noncompliance”. Thus, at a cognitive level, an injustice frame identifies both an issue as inherently egregious and its source as a known actor (Fisher, 1997). Frames are thus a heuristic, distilled information, that are used by activists to expediently direct the actions of individuals or groups (Snow et al., 1986).

Young (2001) posited a set of ways in which activists shine a light on the shortcomings of ‘real-existing’ democracy (RED), its entrenched institutions, and the increasingly organized forms of (special) interest representation (Schmitter, 2011: 402-3) that crowd out the public domain of democratic politics. Activists have clamoured a narrowing of the number of ‘characters’ involved in REDs (e.g. resource-rich lobby groups or vast trans-national corporations that wield a disproportionate influence over elected representatives), that is, the ‘exclusivity’ of institutionalized deliberative procedures and the fundamental incompleteness of what one calls ‘inclusion’ in democracy. To them, activists counterpose visibility as a means to achieve recognition for minority or marginalized groups. In this view, visibility for activists is tantamount to securing a place in the public domain that can serve many purposes, from rallying supporters to subverting hegemonic discourses that suppress subaltern contestations of entrenched power relations (Doerr et al., 2013). Protests are a performative enactment of visibility that serves to contest power asymmetries through counterclaims on public space (see Hayward and Komarova

in this volume, p. 75) —both physical, of the street or the square and symbolic, as oppositional discourse expressed through placards, pamphlets, fliers or memes.

In past episodes of collective action, the aesthetics of openness, i.e., the way in which protests are performed as public events, has allowed for the bridging—not least through media coverage—of frames instigated by various aggrieved participant groups (Benford, 1993). In 2011, the General Assembly at Occupy Wall Street was the embodiment of deliberations that thrashed out shared interpretations of movement grievances and aims, both of which stemmed from an evaluation of public spending cuts as socially unjust (Rehmann, 2013). Injustice frames, notably ‘we are the one percent’, aided in the distillation of grievances into discursive tropes and an accessible numerical aesthetics of inequality. Such frames have further drawn on the aesthetics of indignation that was recognized and enacted through world-wide occupations of public space and was carried by the media into a broader public arena (Juris, 2012). Aesthetics, in this interpretation, refers to the ‘expression or performance of protest’ (McGarry *et al.*, introduction to this volume).

In the case of Occupy Gezi, an injustice frame emerged representing the coalescence of environmental, social and political grievances. They ranged ‘from environmental destruction to the aggressive gentrification of urban spaces, from economic hardship to Turkey’s aggressive involvement in the Syrian civil war, from the media and social media censorship to the blocked peace process with the Kurdish liberation movement’ (Vatikiotis and Yörük, 2016: 9). Everyday experiences shared among protesters can paint such grievances in familiar colours, turning them into appeals to social and political change (a process that Snow *et al.*, 1986: 477, describe as frame resonance).

The violent police crackdown at the outset of the Gezi demonstrations on 31 May epitomized the injustice condoned or enforced by the institutions of the state. It acted as a touch-paper setting off large rallies and the occupation of the Gezi Park. The aesthetics of police brutality captured with the iconic picture of the ‘Woman in Red’, a female protestor turned sideways while being pepper-sprayed by a male riot police officer, resonated with a subjective sense of indignation and urgency to respond to the violent hegemony of the state (Farro and Demirhisar, 2014). Similarly, Black Lives Matter more recently seized on the conventional imagery of urban safety, the police car, to display the rebellion of those institutionally deemed as suspect, as depicted in a Kendrick Lamar video:

‘The cop car on stage was demolished as if bombed out, and he, powerfully and defiantly, stood on top of it performing the song that Black Lives Matter protesters would draw on weeks later (...) a contemporary symbol of state oppression that had been re-appropriated as a sign of defiance and empowerment, first by a musician, then by grassroots organizers and protesters who refused to be intimidated’ (Lebron 2017: 36).

The distillation of daily experience and highly-evocative symbols can engender the resonance that propels movements like Black Lives Matter into cultural phenomena that are afforded greater visibility. In its turn, Gezi Park moved from a local, urban planning issue to political resistance against the injustice of unwarranted police violence and a creep towards authoritarianism. This change of scale was overtly aesthetic. Occupy Gezi protesters used the Coca-Cola font to write

anti-capitalist slogans (Emre *et. al.*, 2014), objecting to the neoliberal privatization of space; they exhibited a ‘politics of the body’ where ‘any *body* who was discontented or outraged by police violence or felt choked by the authoritarian regime was out in the streets’ (Gambetti, 2014), and appealed to humour to attract attention to the demonstrations (Balaban, 2015; Dagtas, 2016).

On social media, the aesthetics of indignation served to reproduce the atmosphere of the occupation at Gezi, broadly framed as an ‘injustice’ perpetrated against peaceful demonstrators. On Twitter, the swell of information shared during Occupy Gezi made the movement visible both to its supporters, through the circulation of information pertaining to the movement’s coordination or participant turnout, and to the media, through the accounting of police violence (Ogan & Varol, 2017; Jost *et al.*, 2018). In this chapter, we review Twitter user perceptions of Occupy Gezi and discuss attempts by Gezi protesters to achieve media visibility through this social network.

Visibility denied and regained

In our research, we used Twitter’s Streaming Application Programming Interface to monitor four Occupy Gezi hashtags (#direngeziparki, #occupygezi, #occupytaksim, #occupyturkey, see Mercea *et al.*, 2018). Following a close inspection of the tweets covering a period of a month at the height of the protests, in May-June 2013 (see Figure 1), we contacted 100 users and successfully recruited 24 of them for in-depth interviews.

A small minority of less than 1percent of the users in our dataset had tweeted with the Gezi hashtags for at least 10 days. The interviewees tweeted for at least twenty days during those two months in 2013 (Figure 1). This was a substantial investment of time into the protests whose implications we discussed, in the first instance, in light of the literature on activist persistence.

INSERT FIGURE 10.1 HERE

We showed that tweeting in the service of the Gezi Occupation was a moral act motivated by a desire to convey to a potentially global public the participatory, democratic values that the protests embodied, which were counter-posed to the injustices perpetrated by the state (Mercea et al., 2018). This emphasis on values resonated over time. Its openness reminded us of the Global Justice Movement which, in its day, was depicted as

“a movement centred more around values than ideologies [articulated not] ...through references to big theoretical constructions, but rather by recalling the founding values of justice and peace, dignity and democracy” (della Porta, 2013b: 141).

Occupy Gezi was an experiment in visibility. For our interviewees, all but three of whom were in Turkey and attended the protests, Occupy Gezi represented a temporary suspension of group differences that were recognized through inclusive, participatory decision-making within the governing forum of the occupation. The encampment thus personified a ‘sectional utopia’ (Mannheim, 1929/1952), predicated on the ideals of the occupiers and the self-governing processes they instituted collectively. Rather than to negate a noted polarization among social groups (Konda, 2014), Occupy Gezi made visible efforts to crystalize and enact a political vision of participatory democracy. That vision was in part a response to the political and later physical violence of the government and state institutions under its control. Once organized, popular opposition to the attempt to force through the privatization of public space was physically repressed for being both an ideological threat and a material obstacle¹. As IP5 explained,

‘[Occupy Gezi] was a struggle for justice. [We] were seeking our rights... We emphasized the intervention by Ankara in [the planned redevelopment of] a park in Istanbul. We [had to] pull the government [back down] to the democratic ground again’.

The stand-off with the authorities that unfolded over the course of the occupation, conspicuously received scant attention from the national broadcasting media. Infamously, CNN Turk screened a penguin documentary as demonstrators clashed with the police on 31st May (Tufekci, 2014). In the eyes of our interviewees, this was a glaring dereliction of duty for a pivotal democratic institution and a jarring realization that protesters and their supporters were able to tactically overcome by turning social media and particularly Twitter into an open and public channel for alternative coverage of the protests. In that way, the movement found itself in a position where it was able to generate and propagate its own frames. It thus escaped the definitional power of the media, which had for long decided a ‘movement’s fate’ (Gitlin, 2003: 3).

Twitter substituted the mass media but in turn imposed its own constraints on visibility accruing from its socio-technical affordances, its attention economy (Lovink, 2011) and its regime of accelerated time (Kaun, 2015). One interviewee evocatively described her experience with embracing Twitter to communicate about Gezi:

I have been using Twitter since 2009. I was already using it before Gezi, but I saw it as a platform like Facebook. After that, in 2011-2012, as Twitter use increased, the accounts I have been following turned...maybe a little more political and activist... the beginning of Gezi, the people who got the news first were Twitter users mostly and it was on Facebook a day after... I followed the Gezi process mostly on Twitter, I used Twitter. From the first night

when the trees were cut down...I spent the whole protest with an iPad on my lap. For us, the people on the streets, it was important to see what is happening and where because you couldn't reach anybody, anytime. So, we shared that we had many injured people and animals. I experienced this personally. Honestly, we went to some places to save the people who were stuck somewhere, or... like when we saw someone's tweet and we brought medicine for people who were having an asthma attack (IP18).

It is important to understand that Twitter was a contested arena both during the protests and in their aftermath, especially as opponents of the protesters attempted to characterize the social media uprising as foreign interference. This and other conspiracy theories attempted to discredit them also by using flawed official statistics of event attendance (Özel, 2014). An important reason why Twitter was and remained contested was because of the visibility within Turkish society that the protesters gained through it for their collective effort. The visibility pursued by the protesters was multi-pronged and served multiple purposes. On the one hand, interviewees recounted aiming to sensitize peers - family, friends, acquaintances - to the protests, their civic-ness and extraordinary nature as an enactment of participatory democracy. As one interviewee recalled:

'...I started to tweet as a reaction to the destruction of this green area. It was a social reaction... It was a civic and social concern...It was a desire and need to *make things visible* (emphasis added). It was a prompt response to share my concerns and worries. I wanted to share my worries and sensitivity'. (IP3)

At the same time, visibility was a sought upshot of an already documented course of action (Olesen, 2017: 658) of chronicling the injustice of the asymmetrical symbolic violence perpetrated by the government and the media. They suppressed coverage so as to preserve the dominant discourse on the scope, significance and legitimacy of the protests (cf. Bourdieu, 1999). Tweeting to attain visibility became a media practice whereby activists could wrest some control over the coverage of their outcry (Mattoni and Treré, 2014), turning it into an *eventful* political protest with a potential to engender further social change (della Porta, 2008), by laying bare the physical aggression against them meted out by state institutions. Faced with the realization that "[the] authorit[ies] controlled the central media hubs", activists courted the attention of the international media, thereby loosening the grip of national institutions on the flow of information. IP9 argued that "Twitter challenged the control of the media hubs" while IP4, IP5 and IP12 said:

The repression and dominance of the existing political organization over the public made people explode. And I exploded like [other] individuals in society. We used Twitter to get news and be aware of what is going on through the accounts that we know, and we trust. Twitter became an information tool for us, not a target. (IP4).

...The media [were reduced to a] Penguin [documentary]. We were all walking media. I tweeted in English, to the media in US, Russia, Italy. I tweeted directly mentioning the presidents, the prime ministers. I gained many followers Italian, German from different nations (IP5).

...I tweeted about 27 May...celebrities retweeted and tweeted about [it]...bulldozers stopped and went away. Even though the media were there and recorded the events, there

was no coverage of the event in the media. On 31 May... there were hundreds of thousands of people [in Taksim Square] and there was police violence on the streets. But there was nothing in the media. Then I prepared 8 tweet templates on what was going on in Turkey and how the case developed and sent them to Twitter celebrities mentioning the international trustable news [outlets] like The New York Times, CNN, BBC, The Guardian, etc...at the end of the tweets. It must have been 1 June. [The tweet to CNN alone got] more than 8400 retweets. Then, later [that day] CNN Int started to broadcast live from Taksim (IP12).

As IP12 clarifies, visibility allowed participants and potential participants to form a realistic impression of ‘what is going on’ onsite while providing remote media observers with stories ready for their news feeds and ticker tapes. The latter work was carried out strategically by protesters to ensure that international media are ‘up to date’ with events on the ground (Baruh and Watson, 2015, Mercea et al., 2018). Importantly, also, Occupy Gezi received much support from the Turkish diaspora. The group tweeted extensively and helped the protest attain international visibility, albeit from the safety of their remote locations (Ogan *et al.*, 2016).

This composite ‘coverage’ that surpasses the dichotomy between a hegemonic media narrative and an alternative activist one (see Levy, 2018), ended up allowing the Gezi activists to narrate the events themselves with the best support they could get from within the movement. In the words of one activist:

Since the intervention was inhumane, I decided to use my talents and expertise which are on social media and organizational capabilities to support the protestors in the field. I helped the protestors through creating organizational opportunities, like mapping, providing coordination between people and monitoring CCTV (IP13).

Conclusion

In the short term, the Gezi activists were able to circumvent the obstacles to visibility for the Gezi movement. A scrambled protest event in a public square became an *eventful* (della Porta, 2008) occupation that transformed a localized call for environmental justice into a wider appeal for recognition and participation. Its quest for visibility—made vivid through the images broadcasted via social media—was instrumental to this process. As Hayward and Komanova’s case study of the Orange parade in Northern Belfast cogently evinced (see Chapter 3 of this volume), the visibility of a contentious event such as Occupy Gezi likewise opens up a space of solidarity, and resistance or challenge to authority. In turn, new political opportunities and threats (Tarrow, 2011) can arise from the heightened visibility—in the form of new allies and adherents or, on the other hand, state repression and surveillance.

In the long term, the vivid aesthetics of the Gezi protest may survive attempts to efface it from public discourse. In 2018 Turkey, important sites for these events have seen abandonment and depredation when repurposed for showcasing the political right (Evered, 2018; Zik, 2018). While Twitter contributed to the attainment of visibility, a key outcome pursued by the protesters in Gezi Park and the nearby iconic Taksim Square, social media equally demonstrated their limitations.

These were evident particularly in respect to access and continuity of service in the hands of activists (Tufekci, 2017) rising in opposition to the erosion of democracy, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and the rule of law, ongoing repression and surveillance. What is left in the wake of Gezi is the immaterial frame of a collective sense of “injustice” whose erstwhile prominent place in public discourse has created a memory and political culture that, although fiercely tested following the 2016 attempted coup against president Erdoğan, endures.

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