**Placing Gezi Park in Time**

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**Abstract**

The protests and civil resistance events that started initially against plans and attempts to demolish Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul in June 2013 quickly spread in various dimensions. Simultaneous occurrence of these events at many cities and their over a month-long duration was both unprecedented and unexpected. This chapter aims to shed light on the complexity of Gezi events from the perspective of individuals who took part in them. It reports findings of a fieldwork with short interviews with 123 protestors in Ankara. Through detailed analyses of the participants’ narratives, the chapter explores how different individuals made sense of Gezi events and placed them in the history of Turkey. It also sheds light to the effects of this intense period of political activity on individuals’ conception of and attachments to the society. In this regard, the narratives analysed in this chapter indicate that Gezi events helped re-establishing *the street* as a political sphere that does not necessarily subscribe to explicit ideologies but to new discourses and practices of engagement, and as a place of exchange, where those, whose interests are excluded from institutionalised politics, meet and claim access together.

1. **Introduction**

On the early days of June 2013, thousands of people started to wear swimming goggles on the streets of Turkey. Masks of different sorts were also on demand. There was no shortage of dust masks, medical masks and the good old multifunctional muslin scarves (*tülbent*), with or without handmade embroideries, tied loosely at the back of the neck. Many people were carrying small bottles of vinegar and milk in their backpacks or purses, and appreciating the occasional half-lemon thrown to them from an upper floor apartment. These homemade solutions for protecting oneself and others nearby from the effects of tear gas were internationally shared common knowledge among activists and had been tested many times in Turkey during demonstrations.

As the protest continued, however, appearances of people in the streets changed further. Hard hats and cycling helmets also became popular with the news of those who were tragically hit on the head by tear gas capsules or rubber bullets. Heat resistant gloves and professional gas masks were worn by a relative few. The former was for those who would pick up the tear gas capsule and throw it either back to the direction it came from or in a bucket of water, the latter was needed for guiding those who lost their ways in the heavy tear gas fogs. Then, blood types and drug allergies started to appear scribbled on arms for cases of emergency, signifying things were getting serious. Doctors and medical students were noticeable in their usual white shirts although some were now wearing helmets and masks too. They were volunteering at the first aid clinics that appeared at the centres of events, crowded with patients, at times with severe injuries.

The protests and civil resistance events in Turkey that started with protests against plans and attempts to demolish Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul on the last days of May 2013 are now referred to as Gezi, or June events. Although protests and marches against the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), some of which were of large scale, occurred in the past, simultaneous occurrence of these events at many cities and their over a month-long duration was unprecedented and unexpected, even for protestors, as the findings of this study will indicate in the following sections. Although Gezi Park was very much in the focus, the events almost immediately spread in various dimensions from the park and what it meant. In terms of geographical dimension, the events spread to numerous localities throughout Turkey and abroad. In terms of scope, the focus of protests escalated from an *issue protest* about the use of urban public spaces to an *identity protest*[[1]](#footnote-1), or an overall rejection of policies and actions that were thought to be undemocratically imposed on people with different worldviews than the JDP government. In terms of acts of protest, while the most basic form of *chapuling*[[2]](#footnote-2) was gathering at certain locations and protesting with slogans and banners, the events quickly produced a broad range of objects and outputs such as posters, graffiti, stencilling equipment, installations, resistance songs or resistance version of songs, performances, photographs and videos, many of which quickly found their way to social media. Activities also very quickly changed shape from individual or small groups gathering at places to more organised activities such as neighbourhood forums, seminars and workshops.

Overall, the emergence, scale and multifaceted development of the protests in Turkey in June 2013 indicate that they were embedded in complex societal processes. This chapter explores this complexity and aims to reach a better understanding of where these events came from through the perspectives of individuals who took part in the events. Analysing narratives collected through street interviews in Ankara in the early days of June 2013, the chapter dwells upon causal and temporal reasonings that protestors employed while making sense of the events and placing them in the history of Turkey. The chapter also sheds light to the effects of this intense period of political activity on individuals’ conception of and attachments to the society.

Gezi events is a heated issue. In addition to tragic deaths and injuries, the events indicated a deepening divide in Turkey. This chapter does not aim to make a comprehensive analysis of the events or cover all perspectives related to them. Its aim, instead, is studying how people who took part in Gezi protests saw the events and how they explained temporal and causal dimensions of the events as they were developing. Even within this focus, it is important to note that 2.5 million people are estimated to have participated in Gezi events across Turkey. Given this scale, it is likely that diverse groups at various localities experienced and made sense of the events in different ways. The data analysed in this study only covers some of these experiences and meanings.

Within this particular focus, however, the findings indicate the social and political complexity of contexts and conditions the protestors found themselves in. Although participant narratives studied in the chapter are not short of emotions such as hope and fear, they also reveal elaborate analyses and interpretations that led participants to break with the past, with what they see as a long period of political inactivity. The remainder of the chapter presents a brief review of the existing literature on protests, selected findings and conclusions in three sections.

1. **Understanding Large Scale Protests**

Large-scale protest like Gezi events, have long captured the interest of scholars. Important questions that are raised in relation to these events are *why*, *when* and *how* these events occur and what their effects are. In this section, I present a very brief and selective review focusing on ideas that are useful for understanding temporal dimension of protests. It must be noted, however, that it is not possible to separate the question of *when* protests occur from the other questions mentioned above namely *how* and *why* they occur and *what* their impacts are.

Early research on large-scale protests referred to them as collective behaviour (or action), theorising that they occur due to grievances and discontent from existing states. Collective behaviour (CB) studies, albeit implicitly, viewed protests as peculiar and undesirable events outside the sphere and functioning of political institutions and emerged due to automatic response, or hysteria of masses, or as results of social breakdowns (Turner and Killian, 1987). Social movements literature, however, positioned protests in broader social contexts, range of actions and temporalities than the CB studies.

The literature on social movements is voluminous and accommodates heterogeneous approaches. In this brief review, I will try to organise these approaches around assumptions related with agency of individual protestors and the questions of *when*, *how* and *why* that are highlighted above. Resource *mobilisation* (RM) approach, for example, provides an indirect answer to the question *when* large-scale protests occur by focusing on the question of *how* events come into being (Meyer, 2004). Pointing out, in response to CB studies, that although grievances may be common and long-standing, they do not always lead to protests or the emergence of social movements, RM approach argues that widespread discontent cannot be seen as a sufficient condition of large-scale protests, although it may still be a necessary or relevant condition. Instead, the RM approach explains how and when social movements form through entrepreneurial (and at times professional) actors’ access to and organisation of resources (such as money, labour and time,) particularly those of broader conscious constituents outside the direct beneficiaries of the movement (see, for example, McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977).

While the RM approach changed the perception of social movements and large-scale protests from suddenly forming, grievance-related, closed entities largely consisting of direct beneficiaries of the core movement objectives to forms of organisation that can respond to new institutional structures and, in this respect, can recruit full-time, professional activists to capture and make use of resources, access broader audiences via mass media and develop bureaucratic apparatus for using of *mobilising* resources, it is criticised for overemphasising economic sphere of movements and not recognising variety of ways different movements emerged and were organised (Jenkins, 1983; Sommerville, 1997).

The political process (PP) approach shifted the focus of analysis from resources to processes, especially those whereby groups and interests that are excluded from institutionalised politics attempt to gain access. The focus also shifted from internal strategies of the movements to make good use of resources to external strategies aiming to political opportunity structures and contexts. In this respect, in the PP approach, the concept of political opportunities (Tilly, 1978; Kitschelt, 1986) replaced the central role of resources in the RM approach for explaining why social movements happen *when* they do. Accordingly, since people who take part in social movements do not construct goals and strategies in a vacuum, but they assess changing political contexts and their impact on incentives, the timing of the social movements depends on changing incentives for collective action (Tarrow, 1994, 1996) in the external political system (Morris, 2000). While PP perspective places the agency, rationality and actions of protestors and social movement members in political contexts, the concept of political opportunity is criticised for being very broadly and vaguely defined leading to confusions (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Meyer, 2004) or tautologies (Goodwin, et al, 1999).

While the approaches reviewed so far tend to focus on actions of protestors, discourses are also studied in the existing literature. The concept of framing is particularly important in this respect (Benski and Langman, 2013). Framing refers to negotiations of meanings about what reality is all about, or which parts of this reality are relevant and noteworthy. The concept of framing is mostly understood in an active way, underlining the strategic role of leading activists or ‘*meaning entrepreneurs*’ in passing their interpretations of reality to others (Snow and Benford, 1992) in a way to exploit political opportunities. At the same time, it is also recognised that culture may influence the framing processes without necessarily being recognised by all activists (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999).

While the ideas covered so far are concerned with *rational*, or in other words, conscious and analytical agency of protestors, this reference to culture covers socially constructed and cultural embedded aspects of agency. In addition to affecting cognition and emotion of individuals such as in framing (Benski and Langman, 2013), culture is thought to provide protestors with a tool kit for strategies through its repertoire of symbolic and historical meanings. While the social movements literature in the US addressed the role of culture and social agency mostly through the concept of framing, studies in Europe evolved into *new social movement* (NSM) approach (Benski and Langman, 2013) that positions social movements in relation to major social conflicts in the society, usually referring to class struggles. NSM holds that constructing an identity in opposition to others and political systems that sets the dominant rules is at the core of social movements. In this regard, the influence between social agency of individuals and movements is not one directional (see also Melluci, 1985, 1998).

The approaches reviewed above have intersections rather than clear-cut distinctions between them. At the same time, they accommodate divergent assumptions about social phenomena. CB, RM and the political opportunity concept reflect the search for general and mechanistic answers to questions such as why, when and how social movements emerge. The framing concept, cultural inquiries and NMW approaches to collective identity reflect more constructionist perspectives (Klandermans and Tarrow, 1988).

1. **Gezi events in time: a participants’ perspective**

This section reports findings of a qualitative fieldwork that collected perspectives of 123 people who were taking part in the events (participants hereafter) in Ankara through short interviews. The interviews were conducted at locations that are close to the city centre (Kızılay, Tunalı and Kuğulu Park, Kennedy Road and Ayrancı neighbourhood) both during the day and at night, starting a few days after the beginning of the events and continuing for about a week. The section is organised under three themes. It first reports descriptive narratives about the events and their various characteristics. These descriptions already start to draw a temporal perspective by depicting expansion of events from protesting plans for demolishing Gezi Park to cover a broad range of issues. The section, then, presents findings more directly related to temporal and causal aspect of participants’ narratives, aiming to depict long-standing discontents and grievances that the participants put as the central cause of protests. Finally, it brings the temporal focus on an even longer time period, exploring how the participants made sense of events in relation to their understanding of recent history of Turkey.

In terms of presenting data, while the participant narratives presented in the section as examples are grouped under the three themes mentioned above, in the interest of showing participants’ perspectives and reasoning more completely, the narratives are not further divided into shorter units of meaning according to these themes. Instead, they are kept relatively long, giving an idea how participants link different issues and levels of temporality. This creates a soft shift in the scope of example narratives instead of a clear-cut categorisation of topics and themes.

***A just awakening***

The first set of themes I will discuss in this section provides insights for answering questions such as: *what was happening* and *what was it all about*. Regarding the former, while making sense of the events, many participants referred to a *resistance*, an *uprising* and/or a *revolt* when defining the events. In the eyes of most of these participants, this resistance was against the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, or it was more specifically against the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, while for few others, it was against the *system,* which was left as a broader, more complicated and abstract entity in their narratives. There were also frequent references to a perceived change in the state of the society, at times expressed in reference to a person’s states of mind. Events, in this sense were an *awakening*, *realisation*, *resurrection*, or the *breaking down of the fear wall*. These metaphors capture an observed change in the way large numbers of people pay attention and react to things that are happening in the country. Other participants used sudden event metaphors such as *explosion*, *flood* or *fire* in relation to the quick expansion of protest in various locations and domains other than Gezi Park.

These actions are completely the reaction of a society that is under pressure. It is the manifestation owing to their efforts to change a society that is supposed to be secular into an anti-secular society, a sharia society by force. Ihm.. at the same time it is the breaking point of the wall of fear (Participant 68).

Well, these actions are actions that took place as a result of an accumulation. I mean, without being under any kind of pressure, people, solely with reason [sağduyu], being fed up to their throats with things, their way of expressing themselves, this is how I see it. No party, no power, no political view, completely out of these, I think people gathered here to express their hardships and protest these actions of the government with a dictator (Participant 102).

A just awakening, an awakening of people, I think. This action is an unbelievable one and there is a human potential that I’ve never expected. So after all, the people weren’t asleep. But to be realistic, we are in the minority (Participant 84).

I mean for ten years, in different areas, people were, how can I say, exploited to very serious degrees with JDP’s policies, I mean things were at the point of getting fed up. When all of these happened, people naturally went to the streets, this remains very normal, I mean (Participant 114).

Whereby we are free, we will get out freely and march. Without furore, of course, we will shout our slogans (Participant 17).

While the narratives given above as examples refer to a diverse range of issues, some of which are discussed later in the chapter, I will focus firstly on arguments related to legitimacy and rightness of events. In this respect, in addition to indicating a state of change as mentioned above, the expression ‘*a just awakening*’ is one of many examples, where participants positioned the events as legitimate and right. Common themes used to establish this position include the theme of participation based on individual-level decisions. In this regard, some participants carefully noted in between sentences that their actions were not centrally organised, or linked to political parties. In relation to this observation, some participants assigned a *natural* or *naturally occurring* character to the events. It is important to note with respect to these discursive efforts that positioning events away from institutionalised politics and established ideologies was used to claim legitimacy, implying perceived reservations in wider society with respect to ideological conflicts and centrally or hierarchically organised political actions.

Such expressions were further supported by positioning the events closely with the aim of fighting for freedoms and democracy that *should have been given* to *everyone* *anyway*. At the same time, participants carefully distanced themselves from any acts of violence and constrained their activities within the limits of peaceful protests. In these accounts, violence had a defining role in two ways. On one hand, police brutality was seen to strengthen the legitimacy of protests and demonstrate why they are necessary. For example, the expression “*whereby we are free, we will get out freely*” positions the protests at the centre of both experiencing and testing freedom in the sense that *if a person cannot freely get out to the streets to protest, then s/he is not free*. On the other hand, participants wanted to disassociate themselves from destruction of surroundings and other acts of violence. This condition is also clear in the way the abovementioned narrative continues: “*without furore, of course*”.

If we look at the first day of the most recent actions at Gezi Park, the group there was only doing a sit-in action, reading books in their tents and the police applied, I mean, a strong violence. Following that, this crowd.. I am here now owing to their intolerant behaviour not showing patience towards even such a normal action within legal limits. Later on, if we look at the progress of the actions, I definitely do not support the provocation-based events in the two days. Destroying the surrounding, or you know, taking down the billboards or even perhaps burning them. Apart from this, for example, I was not in the events yesterday, only because of those. But apart from that, I think we are using what is our right in this way (showing protests) (Participant 5).

…but after coming here and participating the events, the thing that led me to come here everyday has been the cruelty they showed against very young children. The cruelty they did to 14 years old children is not an acceptable thing, no matter what they are defending. Even if there were nothing at stake, I would still come (Participant 50).

At first, to be honest, I was not interested very much in the actions… But recently, until the other day, I was thinking even the police is doing their job, but from the videos I watched to the attitudes of police in places I have been, I developed an attitude against the police and I am here for days now (Participant 89).

The actions, for me, this Gezi Park march was at last the last drop that flooded the glass because he was continuously imposing new restrictions as he wishes. At some point, of course this led to people to accumulate and accumulate things and explode (Participant 56).

The beginning of these events was already created as a spark. The colonialism (sömürgecilik) of the Ak Party (White Party, JDP) was already on us for ten years. Gezi Park was passed on like a spark for the people (Participant 31).

Still after the seventh, eighth, ninth day (of events), we see harsh statements. Instead of a rapprochement, the government is in the direction of clash, alienation by pushing certain segments into the background, bringing only their own segments forward (Participant 88).

Also relevant to these negotiations of legitimacy were views distinguishing a *true democracy* from the way JDP government works. Participants describe the latter as an elected government that uses the popular support in elections to ignore the rights of those who didn’t support him, apply policies and decisions made by one person and imposes a particular way of life on the society. This description is put in contrast to a *truly democratic* government that represents all groups and segments of the society, and embraces multiplicity of roles, responsibilities and identities.

We are only against that prime minister is doing whatever he likes after sustaining the sufficient majority, taking the democracy talk at his back (Participant 18).

(We want) democracy but a true, working democracy, I mean not only in talk but a working democracy a participative democracy, being listened to, the end of despotism. We don’t want dictatorship in Turkey any more (Participant 8).

Tayyip, his majesty (hazretleri), should not go ahead and decide on things like I will build this here on his own without asking to anyone 60).

In this country, there is an Urban Planning Ministry, in this country there is a Ministry of External Affairs, there is Home Office, you name it there is Tourism and whatnot ministry, a lot of ministries. I mean, to be honest that one man, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is standing up and declaring all decisions as if he made them... this looks a little like a dictatorship to us, I mean to me at least. I feel like everything, the whole party consists of him, and what is more, the whole government and the whole country consist of him (Participant 89).

All these efforts participants put towards justifying their activities and defining them within legal rights should be considered together with and in response to discourses and actions that criminalise protestors such as Erdogan’s ‘*looters*’ comment and seemingly arbitrary arrests of protestors. Against this general background, participants pay attention to positioning themselves in the sphere of using democratic rights for peacefully protesting an increasingly oppressive government.

Relatedly, regarding the second question above (what was it all about), as already shown in the narratives presented above, it was recurrent in participants’ narratives that the protests were not only about saving *‘a few trees’* at Gezi Park. The issue was much broader in a way to cover interrelated issues such as personal freedoms, the perceived lack of representation in the government in power, and concerns on changes in the society that are thought to be imposed by the government undemocratically and in a way to restrict personal freedoms.

This resistance that started at Gezi Park, for me, is not only protecting a green area. This is a resistance in which people act on the instinct of protecting their freedoms, human rights, the rights that are given to them or should have been given to them (Participant 93).

These actions, for me, first of all considering the starting point, are sincerely support for Gezi Park. You know it has a starting point as protecting the trees, protecting the green. But beyond that, like more or less everyone says, you know it is a resistance against the government’s, or Tayyip Erdogan’s oppressing regime, dictating us how we should live. It is in fact the realisation of us voicing what we could not voice for months and years by coming together (Participant 2).

…and it is a very just action. The issue really came out of ‘a few trees’, I mean this was the definition of those who talked from the government but I think of it more like an explosion of fury and I think it is a very just action. I am quite happy to be here at the moment (Participant 66).

I consider this as an action against the government. You know I think for ten years there has been a government that did not embrace them and they don’t want to accept this any more. I am in the same view too. I mean, I didn’t come here only for the events at Taksim. I came because I am generally against the government’s policies and for putting this in place as a general reaction. That is why I participate (Participant 76).

In my view, now.. the current government works only for a particular group. It continuously does things that will comfort that group, based on the requests of that group. And the opposite site has a considerable lack of representation. Due to this lack of representation these people want to show their reaction at some place, in some way. And the Gezi Park actions have literally became an instrument for this. And it is very good that it happened. If God permits I hope it continues this way (Participant 62).

Five days ago, I went out to the street only for the trees that were cut in Taksim but today I am here for my freedom and, you know, for justice. I mean we are scared, we are all scared, because you know.. the aim is not being the enemy of the government, I am not an enemy to noone but every living thing that breathes is free and equal. At this point, you know, I am, at this point, in the fight of this (Participant 23).

***Accumulation and explosion as cause and effect***

Further to events that were happening in previous days, participants referred to long-term issues that were concerning them. Central to these narratives on temporal sensemaking was the theme of *explosion* following ten something years of *accumulation*. This ten year period roughly corresponds to the time the Justice and Development Party (JDP) had been in power. The narratives analysed in this subsection provide answers for the questions: *what were the issues that were long concerning the protestors* and more generally, *why did Gezi events happen?*

Like the narratives discussed above, some of the narratives given below refer to an undemocratic rule and place a *patient but tough nation* *now coming together* at the opposing side. Furthermore, through an account of the *mazlum* (victim) actually turning out to be the *zalim* (cruel one), they challenge one of the main tenets of JDP’s long-term discourse claiming state in Turkey oppressed religious freedoms. In this regard, being oppressed emerges as a contested position used in diverging histories of Turkey as well as in framing of current political events.

You see people are, for ten years, watching with patience ihmm the governance of JDP and the tyrant ruling them. We are a very patient nation, really (Participant 21).

In the sense that, in this ten years, there was a government established on a continuous literature of oppression, there was a victim, that was what was reflected on us. At the moment, we learned by experience how this victim [mazlum] is a great tyrant [zalim] (Participant 50).

The actions, in fact are the result of ten years of perhaps an intolerance that is how I describe them. That everybody is labelled. Some because they are Kurdish, some Alevi, some leftist, some for being a member of something or another, all are alienated and I think this is an explosion of fury (Participant 66).

This is restriction of rights and a person always imposing things, moreover in a tone like ordering. And at some point people against this.. At first, when you look at people you would say, ‘dude (abi), will they never act on this? Don’t they care the least? Don’t they see it at all?’ You would say for people about his behaviour. But it seems it accumulated and accumulated inside people and exploded in this way (Participant 55).

The participants also elaborated on various specific aspects and examples of repression they were observing or experiencing in the past decade. A distinction within these specific examples can be made between a hard side of issues covering events and actions that are associated with the JDP government and a softer side covering the PM’s discourses and positions.

Possibly the broadest hard issue that participants talked about is the structural changes that JDP made in the nature of the state. This is exemplified in the first narrative below coming from a young scholar among protestors. The participant talks about *political Islam* coming to power and *capturing the state*. He also describes the condition of those who do not support political Islam in this process with the metaphor of *eating* constantly, not being able to digest and finally throwing up when broader political environment and conditions changed in a way to make things difficult for JDP. This perspective resonates well with the political process approach that positions temporal dimension of protests in conditions produced by broader events and contexts. The second narrative presented below is both a more individual (in the sense that it doesn’t relate to a theoretical grounding like the first) and a more national (in the sense that it relates to participants sense of belonging and responsibilities for the country) perspective. It captures a theme of *despair* in terms of country being in need to be saved from JDP and people standing up for this purpose.

Now together with political Islam coming to power in Turkey in 2003 and after 2007, particularly with the Ergenekon process its capturing of the state and the process that follows, in fact, a state of accumulation in the society. I mean the society could not develop an opposition that can have an impact on the macro policies, could not get into a movement of rejection against any of the JDP policies, except the Tekel resistance perhaps, I mean except very small localities. Hence this act of constant eating could not be digested by the society, it was clear that it would create a throwing up at some point. Hence also conjecturally, now it is needless to mention them all, year 2013 would be a year of compression of JDP like the socialist left was arguing for a long time now. This people movement, is in fact, in my view, the throwing up of all policies that were not digested at the point JDP was compressed (Participant 86).

Our dear [sayın] Prime Minister should not underestimate the people of Turkish Republic like that. This action showed that. Yes, what did Atatürk say? Turkish People stand up very hardly but once stood up, sit down very hardly too. They should write that down somewhere. He said another thing, if my country falls into despair one day do not wait for a saviour, you are the saviour. We are here today for this reason (Participant 10).

While these perspectives were related to participants’ views about the country as a whole, they were linked to concerns about freedom and security at a more personal level. Participants drew a picture of increasingly *darker* colours when they expressed how free they feel with respect to their identities and life-styles. Specific examples of these and related concerns include new regulations limiting the retail sales of alcohol, imprisonment of journalists, two tragic attacks to civilians at Roboski (Uludere) and Reyhanlı, projects related to urban public spaces, and privatisation of national entities and resources.

These actions mean freedom to me. These actions for me are showing my stance against a PM ruling me, telling me to do these and not to do those, dictating these are good for you and those are bad for you. I don’t have any other aims. I am not here for any party or any political formation (Participant 105).

So, perhaps we want to become sniffers (tinerci), perhaps we want to become atheists. We want to say this openly, you see. My state may be wishing to raise a religious generation and it may raise one too, I can’t interfere in this. At the end, he is a segment’s PM, he has to be our PM too. We only want to say the following, raise a religious generation but leave the ones who are not religious alone too. I mean people should be able not to be religious in this country (Participant 73).

It is not only the fifty percent that lives in this country; there is also the other fifty percent. We respect everybody’s rights and I think everybody should live in the way they want (Participant 24).

So we are not looking at these events like leftist, rightist, atheist, godless, bookless, Kizilbash, Sunni, Yazid. If you feel you are oppressed you absolutely should be here (Participant 99).

These actions, for me, in fact are, I regard them as actions where I can build a barrier to darkening of my future. How can I say it, for instance I regard them as a point of resistance against dictatorship (Participant 119).

These people are raising their voice against everything that accumulated in those ten years, weather it is Reyhanli or the attitude against kissing at the subway or whatever you may think, Roboski and etc, like the alcohol law all these issues (Participant 90).

The soft side of issues mostly covered perceived insults towards and alienation of the opponents, or those who are thought not to vote for JDP, in general and the protestors in particular. In addition to the looters (*çapulcu)* comment, two other recent and controversial statements by the PM had reflections in the narratives of participants. The first of these statements is that the PM asked, in relation to policies regarding alcohol consumption during a group meeting of JDP at the parliament, why the rules imposed by the religion are rejected by some while the laws made by *two drunkards* are respected. The “two drunkards” in this speech is generally interpreted as standing for Ataturk and Inonu, who are among the founders of the Turkish Republic. The second discourse that participants mentioned is the PM’s statement at a press conference at the early days of Gezi events that they are hardly keeping the 50% of the society from going out to the streets against the protestors. This 50% in PM’s expression is interpreted as his supporters.

The relative importance of such discourses compared to more concrete actions and policies is clearest in the first narrative below where the participant argues that people would not respond this way had they been not passed over and disdained, even if the PM’s actions and events were the same. At the same time, in many other narratives, soft issues such as the PM’s controversial discourses were considered together with hard issues such as the changes in relation to the secular character of the state and infringement of personal freedoms.

I mean, people who are resisting here today want to feel that they are held in esteem, listened to when they say something… Okay let him do everything he says, let him build the mosque, I mean these people are not against mosque, let him build the barracks he wants, take out the park and move it to somewhere else. But while doing this, if he hadn’t done it like ‘I did it and it is done now’ these people were not going to raise much voice either, to be honest. But they ignored too much, they abhorred too much, in my view that’s the whole problem… (Participant 52).

Look this is, Turkey is ruled by a dictating regime now. This is a revolt of all people against that. I mean the issue is not only cutting the trees at Gezi Park. You see that the alcohol law is made by two drunkards, you name it that they provide rents to their advocates in a way to build malls everywhere. We participate the actions to stand against those (Participant 94).

Honestly sister (valla abla), our gathering here.. our PM’s talk, calling us looters (çapulcu) and saying that we are standing on a state founded by two drunkards, calling us looters and demolishing trees and building malls to the plot he sold to the Americans, already there has become, there are lots of malls in our country. I mean everbody is here for these three things (Participant 54).

JDP in fact shows us how small town trader mentality (kasaba esnaf zihniyeti) has become the government in this country, enemy of science, at the same time Americanist, not putting any distance between itself and the international capital, like we see in the case of Syria, directly being its subcontractor and representing the most fearless shape of neoliberalism. So much so that it doesn’t even need IMF, IMF as you know is not essentially a creditor institution it is the institution of enforcing austerity programmes to countries. It doesn’t even need that, I mean it will almost give advice to IMF, look this is how well we privatise. Therefore, JDP has a symbolic meaning here. Because it is not representing an independent party, I think its quitting would be in this sense a big defeat of neoliberal order (Participant 86).

The use of lands that were previously public urban spaces for constructing *too many* privately owned shopping malls also had a place among these more general concerns. The third narrative given above, for example, comes from a high-school student from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Ankara. This narrative lists two discourses of PM - one about ‘us’ and another about the funders of the state – and JDP’s policies that *sell land to Americans* and *fill everywhere with malls*. ‘Americans’ in the view of the participant is a particular type of ‘them’ that the he closely associates with turning limited urban space into commercial areas. This image of imported ways of place-making lies parallel to conception of neoliberal order that is, once again, associated with ‘America’ in the fourth narrative presented above coming from a politically active university student.

***Locating Gezi Park in histories of Turkey***

This part concentrates on narratives, in which the participants were making sense of the events in relation to the history of Turkey. In this regard, the narratives analysed in this section provides insights for questions such as *how did the protestors interpret the events in relation to longstanding issues* and *how did they made sense of events in the course of recent history of Turkey*. This long-term meaning of Gezi events is worth exploring as many participants regarded the events as of *historical* importance. They are also important for placing the phenomena of accumulation and explosion in a process that began much earlier in the view of participants.

The relatively older point of reference in narratives was the establishment of Turkish Republic. The name of Atatürk was mentioned very often in the interviews, at times for putting the events in a historical perspective. In the second narrative given below, for example, the participant brings about reflections of the ‘counter-revolution’ theory (see Rakovsky, 1909), the idea that the modernisation agenda of Young Turks, and later, the secular revolutions of the republic was countered by a regressive rival that aimed to bring back sharia law or non-secular Islamist politics. In this context, the participant loads a dual meaning into ‘you’ in the expression ‘*you were not able to demolish this government for eighty years*’. Firstly, by directly responding to the PM’s drunkard comment he clearly includes him in this ‘you’. Secondly, in a plural sense, he refers to those who were willing to *demolish the state* for eighty years - roughly since it was established. Against this dual ‘you’, the participant puts his own identity, signalling a secular worldview and attachment to the way of life established during the times of the republic through the metaphor of being Mustafa Kemal’s (Ataturk’s first name and how he was known before the establishment of the republic) grandson.

These actions for me, means the liberation of my country. It means my country, that is. How can I say it? In the same way the country was saved with the War of Independence, in the same way, this is the second one in my view. A thing of history, another history is being written here today (Participant 6).

I am Mustafa Kemal’s grandson. If a drunkard established this government (state) and you were not able to demolish this government for eighty years, I am proud of that drunkard (Participant 19).

The second point of historical reference that emerged from participant narratives was the military coup in 1980. Gezi events were understood in a way to establish two different historical breaking points in relation to the 1980 coup. On one hand, the police violence during Gezi events, brought back memories, stories and histories of violence that took place before, during and after the coup. Hence, the participants were worried that that kind of darkness was there to follow. On the other hand, in line with the resurrection theme mentioned earlier in this section, there was a possibility the participants identified and hoped for that the widespread protests were a way out of the states and beings that the coup was thought to have led to.

One of the sad sides is that Tayyip was reflecting this as democracy but there is no democracy in Turkey. All the opponents are already in prison. Hence, if as a result of this, it (democracy) doesn’t happen, we are among those who lived the 80’s, anarchism (used loosely for casualised political violence) will increase… If those he was talking about (the supporters of the government) get involved (in the events), this time the reaction of people will be harsher, because people who have nothing to lose are always very dangerous. We, I mean as a nation, without a religion or political structure behind, everyone is very reactive, very angry (Participant 22).

Ihm I.. pride, joy, hope, I feel all of these. Today, thanks to God, because there is no police intervention, there is no fear either. And for ten days I have been shifting between these feelings. At one side, I am feeling proud and hopeful for something will happen for the first time, at one side, I am afraid and sad. I am living such a chaos for ten days and I am verry happy there is a youth like this, very proud (Participant 82).

I am from the 80’s generation. Right from the start, I thought there would be someone behind this. I mean provocation, I mean, you know, we were raised with constant fear of coup until this time. You know, we would be tortured or what not, we were raised with these things, raised with fear. But I see that we covered a long distance. I mean up until this point, there were small incidences, I mean for example one person died, a few people died, stones, and many people’s eyes we took out, but in general it was a nice resistance and I want it to continue (Participant 51).

There was a state of fear and oppression over Turkey with this 80 coup. And in fact the domination of that generation, that is the generation of 70’s and the domination that was reflected on their children continued until today. Although, you know, there were movements like this at times in 90’s, at the end of 80’s, none of them were this much socialised. In this respect, this is a process that beats that pressure, that lassitude that the 80 coup created on Turkey. In this respect, this is an important process in the sense that people are meeting with the street again, meeting with each other on the street again and discovering their own power. This is the aspect I care most (Participant 57).

Noticeable in the responses of the young participants in their twenties were the emphases put on experiencing nothing but *this* period of overall political inactivity that started after the coup in 1980 and continued up to Gezi events through parents’ upbringing their children in fear of political violence and manipulation of politically active individuals for other aims. The third narrative given below puts the element of fear into a scale both in relation to taking part in Gezi events and more generally about political activism in Turkey. Coming from a young participant, who, in his own words, were raised with the constant fear of being subjected to violence in case he is politically active, explains how relieved he is that so far there were *only* few deaths and many serious injuries.

It is also noteworthy that this perceived period of inactivity was not only relevant to political sphere of the society. Instead, inability to act and fear constituted a negative space, which was also experienced and dealt with at the personal level with reasonings, feelings, actions and interactions. This struggle in getting to know and accepting the *society in lassitude* is evident in a young participant’s narrative presented above where he remembers asking himself ‘*will they never act on this? Don’t they care the least? Don’t they see it at all?*’. There were differences in how different participants dealt with this issue. While some young participants explain they were active in demonstrations and hoping to involve larger groups in their activities, others reported feeling hopeless, helpless and detached from the society due to this perceived period of political inactivity. The events, therefore, were clearly a break through for them.

In fact this means a lot because you know, in fact I am from a generation that was born into Tayyip’s government. I was born in 92. And for the first time in my life, I see people, I mean a mass like this and a mass that is so angry and furious. And this is a very important thing for me actually. I at the same time involved in organised struggle for years, I haven’t seen such an activity before (Participant 115).

For a long while I had the following opinion. I mean, in one way or another we chose these, we brought this party to rule us and in some way we deserve this, I was thinking this way. I mean, due to the state of people in Turkey, due to their attitudes, and because democracy is a system like this, I mean we will remain like this, this is something we have to bear as the remaining 50 percent (Participant 89).

Ihm… until this time we have never seen people, in the streets like this. Leave that alone; we didn’t get any reaction like commenting on events or standing against them in one way or another. These events were in fact self-organising natural processes and after these natural processes, that people are in the streets, that they are resisting, that they are slowly getting familiar with this culture is a very nice outcome, from my point of view (Participant 58).

I think this is only a beginning because in particular I saw a lot of high school students and students at the first years of university. Most of these people haven’t voted yet. Beyond voting, they didn’t express their opinions as civilians. I think this will make things change like nothing else, these people now want to investigate, read more, fully discuss their views with each other and they will be looking for roofs under which they will realise the thoughts they have or adopt. This means a lot of active citizens. For me this is only a turning point, I mean just a beginning. This action can end tomorrow but it will lead to great implications in the long run (Participant 92).

These actions, for us, how can I say, the best way of in some ways to pass our thoughts to other people, for these thoughts to become seeds somewhere and blossom. Because neither the person who throws a stone nor that does something else can realise what he/she wants. This is a fact. But only, those people whom we meet at the common denominator here, themselves or their children, one day, if they appear at the right place, at the right time, with the right thoughts, they can achieve something nice. That is what we are here for (Participant 72).

Gezi events, as the breaking point of long-lasting lassitude in society, was not only made sense of through causal and temporal links, but also experienced strongly in an emotional sense. Going out once again to the streets did not only involve discovering the street as public spaces of life, action and expression but also meeting with each other and thereby re-evaluating participants’ beliefs on the nature and character of the society. In line with these re-evaluations, participants described a growing feeling of safety in general and respect towards people.

The freedom of expression hit the top much more, in my view, in these actions. Because people go out very comfortably, they have no fears except the police. This is ridiculous, ironic in my view. But to me it only means freedom. I mean coming here, no matter from which ideology, there is no parties anyway. People have become more helpful. I mean in the past if your shoulders hit, everyone would challenge each other, now people apologise, say ‘sorry’. I think this is a good example of us uniting (Participant 69).

If you are asking what these events mean, you know, for me, if you are asking their reflections on me, for me, I think these actions are a big hope. If you ask me what it infused to me, it infused hope, it infused tolerance. My respect and affection for people have increased. Tolerance! Our dried veins of tolerance started to run again (Participant 90).

And of course, we are not a stupid and apolitical society like these people were led to believe. An explosion is being experienced as we speak, in a very civilised manner, in a way that could be taken as example even those countries in Europe and the world who regards themselves as civilised (Participant 21).

What we take from this is society, I mean fraternity. For example we were here in the last weeks. Because of the pepper spray and since we didn’t have any money on us, they (other protestors) gave us water, gave us a meal, I mean food and drinks. I mean fraternity, friendship, unity. We take this from here (Participant 53).

The excitement in the first days was something different of course, people were experiencing something like this for the first time and perhaps they did thing here with a great hope but after some time passed they started a little bit to think with reason instead of feelings. I think the following should come out from here. If the people (halk) manifest as a gain being able to act together, doing things together in an organised manner, it turns out to be more promising for the future. We know it by now, in my view, that tomorrow is not going to be worse than today. This movement at least opened this process in front of Turkey (Participant 57).

If somebody came up who could make all the people here follow him or her, that would be the nicest outcome. I don’t know if this is a dream or an utopia, but this is what I call the best outcome. If this doesn’t happen, I am sure of one thing many things has started to change. For once we are really going through a change of consciousness. A lot of people understood a lot of different things. I think a lot of things will change. Even if they are not very specific, we will live a lot of changes (Participant 82).

**4. Conclusions**

In this chapter, I explored Gezi events from the perspectives of protestors who took part in events in Ankara. While narratives that are analysed in the chapter refer to a diverse range of issues, I focused on how they relate to temporal and causal sense-making of participants in terms of both short-term and long-term development of the events. In the light of the previous literature on temporal development of large-scale protests, we can identify various aspects through which participants of the Gezi protests and civil disobedience events placed the events in time.

As portrayed in the collective behaviour (CB) approach, for example, Gezi events were strongly linked to longstanding concerns particularly those relating to freedoms, identities and worldviews. Unlike the mass hysteria theme that is prevalent in CB approach, however, narratives analysed in this chapter show that protestors were engaged in thorough analyses and interpretations of the developments in the country while deciding to take part in the events. Likewise, the accounts of increasing trust on the society and the capabilities of its members due to the experiences during the events contrast sharply with the social breakdown theme of CB approach.

In terms of mobilising resources of broad groups of conscious constituents - millions of people taking part in the events for weeks in this particular case - we do not necessarily see organising efforts of entrepreneurial actors, as described in the resource mobilisation (RM) approach, but the police brutality against environmental activists during a sitting action emerging to be a powerful catalyst of mobilisation at a symbolic level with stories and images of oppression versus innocence. In this sense, the environment symbolised with ‘*just a few trees’*, or ‘*the green’* in Gezi talk, falls outside of the usual spheres of political clashes in Turkey, where violence appears to be more normalised. As such, the victims of police violence in this case could not be easily radicalised with suspects of *illegal* political activism, which is then often quickly reduced to ‘*terror’*, but seen as the naïve activists sitting in the park reading their books and trying to save the few trees left in Taksim. That their tents were put in fire, they were brutally beaten, or gassed on the face, therefore, evoked emotions and signified increased existential threats for many.

In terms of the broader political processes highlighted in the political process (PP) approach and the major social struggles that are taken into consideration in the new social movement (NSM) approach, firstly, we see a long historical process of clashes between secular and religion-based worldviews in Turkey. In this respect, the participants see the events as a fair response to changing regime of governmentality experienced in different realms of everyday life, as well as the direct state power and alienation imposed on people with different views and life-styles. Secondly, the narratives positions Gezi events in relation to long periods of political inactivity. From this perspective, the events are the breaking point of fear from political and state violence. While some positioned the events as an act of *awakening* in recent times and in relation to the government’s policies in the last decade, others referred to waking up from a state of inaction and *lassitude* that continued since the military coup in 1980. Gezi events, in this sense enabled people to meet ‘*with the street again, meeting each other on the street again*’. The street and the protests in this context do not subscribe to explicit ideologies but to new practices that re-establish political spaces for individuals that can be shared with others in public spaces like the Gezi Park.

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1. Following the *issue* and *identity clash* concepts in Diez et al 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The act of taking part in the events, derived from the Turkish word ‘*çapulcu*’ (looter) using the English participle form in reference to the Prime Minister calling protestors looters in his speech on 2 June. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)