Space in representation

Dislocation of meaning from the Gezi Park protests to the new Turkish Presidential Compound

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Introduction

Lefebvre’s concept of representations of space has generally been discussed in terms of meanings produced and attributed to space – how it is ‘conceived’. The representations of space, as they stand within Lefebvre’s triad of production of space, are associated with agents producing the conceptualisations of space and serving its organisation in tune with the dominant mode of production: ‘scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers’ (Lefebvre 1991: 38). That is, there is an implied negativity to the concept. Signs, tools and systems of meaning production have been defined within representations of space, and they are viewed as instrumental in the making of the abstract space of capitalism. What I would like to propose in this chapter is to expand the relation between representations and space by developing a ‘trialectics’ with the inclusion of language. This is an attempt to bring into consideration contingencies of historical circumstances and to show that representations of space also present us with a field of contestation. Thus, I would like to show that the social processes are not only related to space and language separately but also to the spatial representations produced through the interaction of these two components. I will develop my discussion through the analysis of recent political contentions over public space in Turkey. I will discuss the Gezi Park protests that took place in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 and their after-effects in terms of representations of space. My argument is that, while the Gezi protests represented a popular movement akin to the contemporaneous global protests based on the occupation of public space, they also witnessed the rise of representations of space as a field of contestation. With the suppression of the movement rendering ‘occupy-style’ protests virtually impossible in its aftermath, this field of contestation prevailed and proved highly efficient in a subsequent episode regarding the struggle over the new Presidential Compound in Turkey’s capital, Ankara.

Occupation as production of space

The recent global tide of protests shared certain features, creating symbols (such as Tahrir Square), methods and names (such as Occupy) that created transnational links connecting the protests and
the activists staging them (Castells 2012). Various scholars have pointed out the democratic
desire at the core of these movements and the performances of citizens materialising this desire
(Badiou 2012; Žižek 2012; Butler 2015). Perhaps one of the most cited common traits in these
protests was their urban character and the key role of public space in their making (Harvey 2012;
Weizman 2015). Lefebvre’s concept of ‘right to the city’ was often a central theme in the ones
raising urban issues of contestation (Mayer 2009; Long 2013).

The Gezi protests that took place in Turkey in the summer of 2013 have also often been
analysed in relation to public space and the right to the city (Kuymulu 2013; Örs 2014; Batuman
2015a; Inceoğlu 2015). The events began as a small environmentalist demonstration against the
destruction of Gezi Park adjacent to Taksim Square, the central public space of Istanbul. This
was a response to the government’s plans to regenerate the site as a sterilised tourist attraction.
Taksim Square is the central hub of Istanbul, with historical significance: it was a major stage of
Turkish modernisation since the late 19th century and an important political locale throughout
the republican history of the 20th century (Batuman 2015a). The 70-year-old Gezi Park (liter-
ally ‘esplanade’) was a registered heritage site designed as part of Taksim’s planned development,
although this did not prevent the government from proposing to replace it with a reconstruc-
tion of the 18th-century Artillery Barracks that had existed on the site. When a small group of
environmentalists camped in the park to impede construction work in the last days of May 2013,
they were brutally evacuated by the police. This in return led to the growth of protests, first
in and around Taksim Square, and then various quarters of Istanbul as well as the major public
spaces of other cities. The square was occupied by the protestors during the first two weeks of
June (together with the central squares of other major cities), until its evacuation by the police.
Gezi Park was home to a communal encampment for two weeks, and during this time Taksim
Square became the heart of the nationwide protests.

The Gezi encampment was similar in spirit to the protest camps which have been the trade-
mark of the global tide of protest that has become effective since late 2010. While the organisa-
tion methods, the role of the unorganised youth and especially the role of social media were
common traits, it is crucial to note that the major cause of the widespread riots was the gov-
ernment’s Islamic interventions in everyday lives rather than economic hardships (Moudouros
2014). Such interventions had intensified under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and
its leader, Tayyip Erdoğan, after 2011. With the increasing number of legal cases against jour-
nalists, university students and even lawyers, the protests were defined by some scholars as a ‘rebel-
lion of dignity’ (Insel 2013).

The earliest protests literally aimed to defend the park, and the violence they faced rap-
idly marked the very public space as a locus and a focus to raise and represent diverse issues
of contestation (Karacul 2014; Lelandais 2016). Within the two weeks it prevailed, the Gezi
encampment was a beacon of hope for the rest of the country, but it was also a real space that
transformed those who participated in it (Karakayali and Yaka 2014). With the lack of a central
organisation, the young activists developed their own practices in accordance with what they
were protesting for. While some distributed the leaflets of revolutionary organisations, some
vocalised environmentalist concerns and even created a small garden. Solidarity tables were
organised to provide food and basic needs for the campers, and a communal library was set up.
A makeshift infirmary was also built where voluntary doctors tended to the injured. A con-
tainer that had been used by the construction workers was occupied and transformed into a
‘Revolution Museum’ in which photographs of the moments of fighting with the police as well
as trophies (such as helmets and pieces of armours that belonged to the police) were exhibited.
There were workshops for different activities, including one for children. The future of the camp
was discussed in forums organised inside the park. Soccer fan organisations protested police
violence side by side with the clandestine revolutionary groups, and the LGBT associations protested homophobia together with anti-capitalist Muslims protesting the neo-liberal economic policies. Thus, Taksim was appropriated by diverse groups protesting distinct issues.

If we look at the demographics of the initial protests, the major actors were, similar to the recent mobilisations across the globe, young activists skilfully making use of social media to organise (Reimer 2012; Farro and Demirhisar 2014; Varnali and Görgülü 2015). These were mostly young, white-collar professionals with college degrees and university students destined to occupy similar positions: a social stratum defined by some scholars as the 'new middle classes' (Keyder 2013). Although the demographics of the protests rapidly became heterogeneous, the influence of the young activists was felt throughout the events with their dynamism, use of technology and the sense of humour that produced a particular language of protest with slogans and graffiti (Sözalan 2013; Yalçıntaş 2015; Dağtaş 2016). The protests often embodied artistic creativity and involved spatial interventions to resist consumer culture (Velioğlu 2013; Çolak 2014).

While scholarly analyses of the Gezi protests mostly focused on the young protestors with little political engagement as the major actor, it is necessary to point out that without the complementary role of the experienced protestors politically affiliated with various revolutionary groups, it would have been impossible to hold Gezi Park and Taksim Square for such an extended period of time. The latter group was quick to construct barricades on the main thoroughfares as well as secondary streets and was continually on duty to maintain them. The architectural know-how of barricades was as important as the use of social media in defending the commons. This know-how was coupled by the geographical knowledge of rallying to Taksim, which contained practical information of meeting points, routes and topographic edges and gates that define the entire district.

The interesting point here is the role played by Gezi Park and Taksim Square as two distinct spaces. Although they are adjacent, they have separate meanings in collective memory. As it would be beyond the scope of this discussion to detail these differences, it should suffice to provide a brief history. Taksim as the emerging modern hub of the late Ottoman Istanbul was first organised with a monument at the centre of a roundabout in the early years of the republic. Later, a large processional ground was integrated to the square. Finally, Gezi Park was added to these two as a green extension (Batuman 2015a). These physical spaces, however, accumulated varying experiences and histories throughout the 20th century. While the park prevailed as a green area (albeit losing portions to several buildings along the way), the monument has served as the 'kernel' that defined the square as a space of representation (Lefebvre 1991: 42). Initially a symbol of nation-state dominating the square, the politicisation triggered by the monument soon led to the appropriation of Taksim Square by radical politics. A momentous event was a major student rally in 1969. The students protesting the US Sixth Fleet visiting Istanbul were attacked by a group of anti-communist counter-protestors; two of them were stabbed to death and more than 100 were wounded in the Square. This event, known as 'Bloody Sunday', marked a turning point in the history of the square and its association with left-wing movements. It soon became the major destination of May Day rallies, and the one in 1977 witnessed the death of 34 people in the chaos following the gunshots fired on the crowd. From then on, Taksim Square prevailed as the most important political space of the country associated with May Day, especially owing to the memory of 1977.

With different mental images in collective memory, the park and the square also gave way to different spatial practices of protest. While the camp inside the park prevailed as a secluded island of freedom, the square became the 'street': the site of slogans, barricades and violent clashes with the security forces. This distinction was not unnoticed by the government; the officials were quick to detect the coexistence of unorganised protestors and the militants from
revolutionary groups. While the former mostly settled inside the encampment in the park, the latter were in the square fortifying barricades for the police assault that would eventually come. When the police raided the square on June 10, the governor of Istanbul announced that they would only disperse ‘the marginal groups’ resisting police forces in the square and the ‘peaceful demonstrators’ in Gezi Park were not a target (Anon. 2013). Nevertheless, five days later, the police stormed the park. The differentiation of the square and the park as spaces of two different groups appeared to be an effective strategy to destroy the diversity of the public space.

If we look at this in reverse, it is possible to see that the success of the protests was a result of the juxtaposition of these two spaces and the actors and practices they accommodated. Representations of space were key in closing the gap between these two spaces, physically adjacent but mentally distant from each other. An interesting illustration of this can be found in the different ways of naming the protests. If we look at the labels used to define the events during and immediately after, what we see is the constant use of two-word noun phrases: the first – descriptive – one was one of Gezi, Taksim and Haziran (June), while the second – the head noun – is either one of direniş (resistance), olay (event), isyan (uprising/rebellion) or protest. A Google search has revealed that between the eruption of the protests and March 2014, the most frequently used Turkish phrases to label the protests (in terms of the number of Web pages in which they are found) were ‘Gezi olayları’ (Gezi events) 1,030,000 times, ‘Gezi Direnişi’ (Gezi resistance) 973,000 times, ‘Gezi Isyanı’ (Gezi rebellion) 20,900 times, ‘Gezi Protestolan’ (Gezi protests) 53,100 times; ‘Haziran Direnişi’ (June resistance) 42,200 times, ‘Haziran Isyanı’ (June rebellion) 9,200 times, ‘Taksim Direnişi’ (Taksim resistance) 56,400 times, ‘Taksim Olayları’ (Taksim events) 79,800 times and finally ‘Taksim Isyanı’ (Taksim rebellion) and ‘Taksim Protestolan’ (Taksim protests) only 3,500 times each.

These labels are important, for they constitute representations of space which define, limit and identify the space through inclusions and exclusions in its definition. In political terms, it may be argued that what is more important than who controls space is who defines it. In this respect, what is at stake is a political struggle over how to define the public space.

What we see in the frequency of these labels is that although the emphasis on time (‘June’) is used by socialist circles emphasising that the politics of the events had extended beyond the defence of the park, space is clearly the focus in most uses. If we look at the terms used to define the episode itself, event is probably the most ambiguous one. Reminiscent of the phrase ‘May events of 1968’, the term – although politically nebulous – implies an enduring historical significance, while the other three terms refer to direct political action. Protest is an action of shorter-term and limited violence in contrast to uprising, which suggests dissent out of control. Among the three, resistance requires a closer look. The term indicates a relatively long (not momentary) confrontation with a hegemonic power. In the literature it has been used to define armed struggles (such as anti-fascist French Resistance) as well as non-violent practices (for instance, cultural resistance). In recent years, it has often been used in the context of anti-globalisation movements to denote opposition to neo-liberalism. In Turkey, resistance has been used as a specific form of political action, especially in the 1970s. For instance, the momentous workers’ strike of 15–16 June 1970 has been labelled as resistance. During the 1970s, marked by political turmoil, occupation of universities and factories parallel with strikes were also defined with this term.

Overall, it is possible to say that event refers to time (hence, History), implying a historical rupture in relation to the dominant order. Resistance, in contrast, refers to varying scales of a spatial niche; a persistent performance of occupation in a certain place. Yet, it is also important that resistance by definition suggests the existence of a greater (pressive) power which it disputes. Meanwhile, event defines an imprecise, even semi-volitional political action which is believed
to have led to a contingent break in historical continuity. In the case of the Gezi protests, the choice of resistance in naming the incident was very much related to the feeling of being treated as ‘minority’, the leftover from the majority which the government defines as ‘the nation’.

Interestingly, while ‘Gezi’ was widely used in the naming of the protests, the most popular slogan was ‘Everywhere is Taksim, resistance everywhere’. This spatial shift in linguistic representations of space is very much related to the politics of public space. In the first episode of the events, Gezi Park was the subject of protest; in semiotic terms, it was the signified to which political action pointed at. However, with the expansion of the protests and the multiplication of themes of opposition, it came to signify an increasing number of themes. Again, to use semiotic terms, the indexicality of political action disappeared here, precisely due to the shift of spatial signifiers: the park yielded to the square as the central public space, which was heterogeneous enough to become the signifier of a larger amalgam of (political) referents. This difference between Gezi Park and Taksim Square is crucial to understand the sudden jump in scale of protest: although they are adjacent physically, their mental co-ordinates within collective memory are not determined by their physical relation. Among these two mental spaces, Taksim Square, with its 20th-century history over-determining the multitude of meanings attributed to it, made it possible to become the void embodying possibilities, a feature Gezi Park did not have. Precisely because of the dislocation of the (physical) focus of contention, the protests could become about anything and everything. This dislocation led to the replacement of certainty with ambiguity in terms of wishes, demands and desires expressed via political action. This, in return, resulted in the rise of a practice of resistance as a performance for itself, surpassing concrete demands.

A typical linguistic illustration of this was the humorous slogan ‘Down with some things!’ (Dağtaş 2016). Here, it is not important what replaces ‘some’; what matters is the counter-hegemonic potential of the slipperiness of signs within the struggle over meanings. In this regard, the slogan ‘Everywhere is Taksim, resistance everywhere’ can be interpreted as the spatial version of ‘Down with some things’; the uncertainty avoiding a specific target in the latter slogan translates into space in the former. The slogan spatialises protest by linking it to Taksim, but simultaneously detaches it from Taksim by designating it to ‘everywhere’. In this regard, it downplays the actual physical space as the subject of protest. Taksim is not the subject of a specific action or protest anymore; it becomes a spatial signifier recognised nationwide. Thus, the struggle over meaning (of Taksim) is also dislocated: the competition of (political) representations of Taksim gives way to the question of what Taksim as signifier represents. The power of the protests lies in its rejection of reducing the mental associations of political meanings embedded in Taksim Square and using language (in the form of slogans and graffiti) to embrace this irreducibility.

Representations of space in the post-Gezi moment

Among other things, the Gezi Park protests witnessed the rise of representations of space as a field of political contestation, where ironic displacement of meanings through humour assumed political character. With the suppression of the movement and the subsequent wave of oppression, a new phase – which I will define as the post-Gezi moment – began. This moment was defined by the fading of protests and the impossibility of ‘occupy-style’ political action based on physical occupation of public space (Batuman 2015b). Nevertheless, in the absence of conditions of street activism, representations of space would become effective in a conflict over another public space in the capital city of Ankara: Atatürk Forest Farm, where a new Presidential Compound was begun construction.
Being a project of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan, the new Presidential Compound in Ankara has been the most controversial construction in the country in decades. The most visible objection to the building was its excessive grandeur that found a place in international media (Arango 2014; Dombey 2014; Withnall 2014). However, its lavishness was far from being the only issue of controversy regarding the Presidential Compound, with a floor area of 300,000 square meters and sitting on a plot twice this size. Its location in Atatürk Forest Farm (AOÇ), a large green space created as part of the modernisation efforts of the early republican years, also created outrage in two respects. The secularists saw its location inside the AOÇ area as an attempt to suppress the legacy of Atatürk (the founding father of the republic) by conquering a site which bore his name and was his personal donation to the nation. Moreover, as the site was a registered conservation area, the courts ordered the construction to be terminated, to which Erdoğan responded: ‘If they are powerful enough, let them come and demolish it’ (Anon. 2014a). The building was inaugurated in late 2014, soon after his election as president.

In the eyes of his opponents, the compound has become the architectural symbol of an authoritarian presidential system associated with Erdoğan himself. The Turkish political system comprises a strong prime minister and a symbolic president as the head-of-state. In this context, the site was initially defined as a prime ministerial compound and reorganised with Erdoğan’s ascent to presidency. Its architectural programme brought together most of the government bureaucracy and its transformation into the President’s office went hand in hand with the gradual concentration of power in Erdoğan’s hands after 2011. Erdoğan was not shy to announce that he was seeking a new system centred around a powerful president as head of the executive also controlling the legislature; this model would be implemented with constitutional amendments accepted with a controversial referendum in April 2017.

The site of the compound, AOÇ, had already become a hot topic of ideological struggle in 1994. In tune with the municipality’s endeavours in eradicating traces of republican modernism, it was proposed to build Disneyland-style attractions with plan changes (necessary to bypass conservation regulations) to which civil organisations and particularly the Chamber of Architects responded with vocal opposition and took the matter to court (Chamber of Architects Ankara Branch 2014; Karakuş Candan et. al. 2015). With the rise of the AKP to power in 2002, the municipality increased its efforts to open the farm area to development. A plan for the area was approved by the municipality in 2010. Although this plan was also taken to court by the chambers, the court ruling was postponed for years, which allowed the municipality to implement its projects. Proposed roads cut through the farm area and disconnected its parts. The built core of the farm, which was designated as the historical recreation zone, was also destroyed with traffic organisation. Finally, a considerable amount of land was allocated to a large amusement park and the new Presidential Compound.

The interesting thing here is the political implications of the vagueness regarding the function of the unfinished building throughout this period. Between May 2012 (when excavation began in the site) and June 2014, when Erdoğan was elected president, the building under construction became a symbol of power although it was not yet occupied. The architectural programme of the compound was one of a not-yet-implemented presidential system from the beginning. While it brought together executive bureaucracy, it also contained a residential building which is typically not part of a prime ministerial compound. If this was envisaged as the new presidential seat, the immense office spaces were not a part of the presidency in the Turkish system. Hence, even before it emerged as an architectural edifice, the compound entered the field of political signifiers as one corresponding to none of the existing offices in Turkey. Yet, it did point to a particular person, Erdoğan himself, which made it all the more problematic in terms of political representation. Here, political influence emerged as an effect of the representational power of...
space. The compound under construction was a signifier of a position transcending the order of Turkish political system and also a referent of Erdoğan himself regardless of his official position.

This vagueness was reflected in the confusion on how to name the ongoing construction as well. Official documents referred to ‘prime-ministry service buildings’, while oppositional media labelled the compound as ‘the palace’. Here, it is worth mentioning that the existing presidential seat built in 1930 was called ‘Çankaya Mansion’, referring to its location in Çankaya, the prestigious district overlooking the capital. Thus, the contrast between the old mansion and the new palace suggested the lavishness of the latter. After the Gezi protests, the compound gradually became the centre of political conflict. The opposition came up with a new name, ‘Ak-Saray’ (White Palace), implying that Erdoğan was building himself a palace, playing on AKP’s insistence that the party’s acronym be pronounced ‘AK Party’ as well as a negative allusion to the White House, which is known in Turkey as ‘Beyaz Saray’ (White Palace). This implied that the compound was to become the base of a presidential system similar to the US presidency, that it was not a state enterprise but a personal one.

Initially the government attempted to appropriate this name. Erdoğan’s successor Prime Minister Davutoğlu willingly used ‘Ak-Saray’ in a speech right after assuming position (Anon. 2014b). After this, the opposition began to use the term ‘Kaçak Saray’, with similar phonetics, where kaçak meant illegal, referring to the legal status of the ongoing construction defying court orders. To the dismay of the government, this name gained currency.

Although he welcomed the term in the beginning, the negative connotations of ‘palace’ later troubled Erdoğan. The more the government presented the complex as one that represented the nation and that its lavishness was a necessity, the more the oppositional campaign underlined its extravagance. The government tried to legitimise the cost by pointing at the restoration costs of Buckingham Palace (Anon. 2014c). Erdoğan even showed the Cuban presidential palace as an example, implying that such grandeur was found even in a socialist country, even though the building belonged to the pre-revolution era. Finally, Erdoğan began calling the complex a külliye. Külliye is an Ottoman mosque complex including educational and commercial facilities. Thus, Erdoğan’s intention with this name might be argued to have been to point at the mosque within the compound, perhaps to refocus the debates on secularism. After that, this name has been in use especially in pro-AKP media, and külliye has begun to be used as an equivalent of ‘campus’ even in complexes without a mosque. Nevertheless, the new label did not succeed in suppressing prevailing use of ‘kaçak saray’, which led Erdoğan to turn to a new title for the compound, the house of the nation: ‘This building is not mine; today it is me, tomorrow another person will take office. This is the house of the nation’ (Anon. 2015: np).

The struggle over the representations of space regarding the Presidential Compound had striking political outcomes. Opposition party representatives refused to attend events at the compound for a considerable time, denying its legitimacy. The Chamber of Architects initiated a campaign sending letters to foreign governments urging them not to visit the compound. It was also an important item on the political agenda during the June 2015 elections, which resulted in the AKP losing 20 per cent of its votes together with its majority in the parliament, although the renewed elections in November reinstated the party in power. Various surveys conducted on the election results pointed out the role of the lavishness of the ‘palace’ for the lost votes.

Conclusions

The recent tide of protests has raised interest in the work of Lefebvre, particularly in terms of themes such as the spatial making of protest and the right to the city. The case of Turkey presents...
a case to develop another one of Lefebvre’s concepts: that of representations of space. As I have shown above, the consequent episodes of the Gezi protests in Istanbul and the struggle over the new Presidential Compound in Ankara illustrate the possibility of representations of space to become a site of struggle. Rather than a specialised field of professional activity functional to capital accumulation, it is possible to see representations of space as a field open to interventions and subversive appropriations.

In the case of Turkey, the Gezi protests followed a similar track of ‘occupy-style’ action based on the physical occupation of public space. Nevertheless, the protests also witnessed the use of language and humour as tactics of political subversion. These tactics also involved the representations of space, which prevailed as a remainder in the aftermath of the events. This line of political action soon resurfaced in a subsequent clash over another public space in Ankara. When construction of the new Presidential Compound was begun in AOÇ, the defence of public space turned to representations of space as the major means of struggle. In contrast to Taksim Square, AOÇ historically had never been a space occupied by heterogeneous social groups. The municipality’s interventions in the area were never met with popular objection/protest, except for the legal battles pursued by professional chambers. While Taksim was a public space that everybody identified individually, AOÇ was a public space that no one felt personally related but considered to belong to ‘everyone’ due to its republican symbolism. It was only after the rise of the new Presidential Compound, that is, only after becoming a topic of ‘high politics’, that the area received popular attention. The debates around the prime ministerial compound evolved into a debate on political regime change after the Gezi events. Thus, the building was associated with an executive presidential system lacking public support and an authority figure transgressing legal limits. Here, the struggle over how to call the compound, that is, its representations, turned into a political issue.

Public spaces are defined not only through their physical uses but also their identity as intersection nodes allowing for contacts between physical and virtual domains. In a similar way, the politicisation of the representations of space made AOÇ a true public space for this first time. Thus, the farm became the forefront of political protest in the post-Gezi moment in two senses. First, the new compound became the focus of opposition to regime change. Second, it was the site for the emergence of a new – ‘non-occupy’ – strategy of protest in an era where the existing repertoire of protest performances have become impractical. The representations of space, here, became the essential component of this new strategy of contestation.

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