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# Protest





# An Example of a Diachronic Imagination from the Gezi Uprising

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*“The B&W archival photos that pierce through the colored current-day images of the same locations is a reminder of the atrocities that are not really past, and that these popular locations that are frequented by thousands daily are scenes of unsolved crimes.”*

The Gezi Uprising was a wave of popular protests and horizontal mobilizations that emerged at the urban center of Istanbul against the destruction of a public park at the end of May 2013 and then quickly spread across the country. The Gezi Uprising was marked by a revolutionary visual strategy of commoning images and repurposing them and this helped connect many protesting neighborhoods and locations, and their specific grievances. Along this synchronic imagination of the protest, the circulation of images also fostered a diachronic imagination that connected past struggles and experiences with the current ones, creating a sense of temporal connections of experiences of this newly imagined community. The photocollages by graphic designer and artist Füsün Turcan Elmasoğlu illustrate the mode through which the heightened diachronic imagination was fostered by the collective creativity during the uprising. Elmasoğlu created collages by bringing images that belong to the same place but 38 years apart; images from the large Labor Day demonstration at Taksim Square in 1977, “the Bloody May 1” together with the current images of the square.

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REVOLUTIONS are the innervations of the collective, according to Walter Benjamin (2006, 124 fn. 10). But the collective is not a given. Rather, it is in the act of imagining and acting that the collective gives birth to itself as a collective. During popular uprisings, the simple acts of protests such as making sounds with pots and pans, going out on the street and joining others, chanting while walking to the nearest crossroad and then to the closest square all together, resonates with the past experiences that took place at the same locations. These acts of protest summon the previous imaginations of the collective through action. They also resonate with recent or concurrent popular rebellions across the world. What some call inspiration then becomes an imagination of a larger collective that extends beyond the borders of the language and the nation.

A common feature of the recent popular uprisings in the twenty-first century is that what started as “bread riots” (Sudan, December 2018), as a riot against fare increase in public transportation (Brazil 2013), as an uprising about “a few trees” (Turkey, 2013), begins to encompass various other issues from urban transformation to austerity measures. Perhaps it is as much a common feature of the uprisings as it is of the current governance in our global neoliberal capitalism that sustains itself through accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2009).

The popular uprising that sparked at the end of May 2013 at Gezi Park was a response to a total disregard for public’s opinion and an increasing authoritarian governance that extends into the private life, threatening what has been gained in the past either in labor law, women’s rights, or environmental and urban protections. Rising from the urban center of Istanbul in Turkey, against the destruction of a public park, it quickly spread across the country. As police violence increased and the mainstream corporate media began to (self) censor news about the events, protests quickly spread to other districts of Istanbul as well as other cities across Turkey. According to official reports by the Ministry of Interior, during the first 3 weeks, 2.5 million people participated in the events that took place in every Turkish city except one, and close to 5,000 people were detained during that period (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2013).

The uprising came to unite all grievances against the increasingly authoritarian usurpation of the powers of the state and against undermining the rights of people, that had been called neoliberal policies and experienced more in recent years around the world with a certain streak of conservatism and authoritarianism. In short, there had been a gradual takeover of the state apparatus and undermining or crippling of its institutions by the ruling Justice and Development Party and its leadership, which appeared as a coup in slow motion, and later gained full momentum in the aftermath of the military coup attempt of 2016.

During the summer of 2013, the protests created a fault line between an increasingly authoritarian government that curtails



"There were still some groups that hadn't yet arrived to the square when the demonstration at Taksim was already in full fervor. The most spectacular banners were prepared for that day." (Photo description in quotation marks are from the blog page of the artist, translations are mine: <http://fusunturcanelmasoglublog.tumblr.com/>.)



"Armed attack at the demo which was organized by DISK (the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) turned the festive jubilation into a sudden panic."

All photographs by Füsün Turcan Elmasoğlu, from the series *Lapse of Memory*. Courtesy of the artist.

freedoms and rights, and the public that reclaims its rights as citizens and asserts its voice to have a say in its present and future. The protests connected various grievances of citizens across Turkey, such as opposition to hundreds of small hydro facilities and mine pits that threaten to decimate wild life and the sustenance of local residents; opposition to the building of military outposts in the southeast Kurdish region of the country; as well as opposition to the neoliberal policies of urban planning that displace and dispossess underprivileged residents of Istanbul. It should be remarked that the Gezi Uprising took place during a period called “Solution Process” during which officially recognized talks were undertaken between the state of Turkey and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (or PKK, in Kurdish, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*). This process collapsed in July 2015, in the aftermath of the 2015 general election. During this period of negotiations, with the hope that the future might hold something better for the society, the resistance brought together people from very diverse backgrounds.

The extensive use of social media platforms by the protestors came as a result of crackdown on news in the mainstream corporate media. As a result of a collective creative effort of dissident journalists, video- and photography collectives and many non-specialists, the propagation of information and instigation through visuals became a significant part of protesting, as observed in the wave of post-2011 popular uprisings around the world. There was a diversity of visual practices that included situationist repurposing of images, for instance turning photographic images to posters, stencils and banners, creating collages, posters, and then making a photographic image of these repurposed images and sharing them in return. This general revolutionary visual strategy of commoning images and repurposing them facilitated the popularity of the protest. Perhaps this strategy is more pronounced in the uprisings of the global south rather than in northern countries where there are more stringent policies on copyright and media production.

The use of communication tools in such a way that attempts to bypass the state and corporate control fostered the circulation of information in a non-centralized way. This is what would be expected from the popular grasp of the flow of communication. But the non-centralized circulation of visual information also helped connecting different places of protest as well as the particular grievances and ways of protesting in these localities. When images started to flow from many districts in the bigger cities, this greatly boosted the sense of partaking in a larger dissenting community. I call this the synchronic imagination of the uprising, and the circulation of photographic images played a huge role in fostering such a synchronic experience of a collective resistance. Another result of these visual cues of the widespread participation in the protest was the legitimization of the protests. There were other factors that helped protests gain popular support and create a discourse of legitimacy, but the circulation of images

was a significant one among them. The flow of images connected struggles about urban and rural dispossession, exploitation at work, legislative misconducts, and threats to personal life choices, and the constant humiliation of women, workers, religious minorities and just about anyone in the speeches of the government officials. In this way, the uprising extended beyond being about a public park in an urban centre to being about all parks and meadows, water resources, coal miners, national filters and restrictions for the internet, and all the ways in which conservative neoliberalism attacks life, human and other. In the spirit of the main slogan of the uprising, “Everywhere was Taksim, and resistance was everywhere”.

The non-centralized circulation of visual information through a collective creativity also fostered a diachronic imagination that connects the past struggles and practices with the current ones that are part of the histories of the neighborhoods and communities. The circulation of images synchronously connected different locations of resistance. But it also connected past struggles and experiences with the present ones, in a diachronic imagination of a community that defines itself through protesting and claiming a voice.

This diachronic imagination is most legible in chants and slogans, and in the visual repertory of collective creations where the current rebel pulls her own inspirations and forces from a past that is often unwritten. And by doing that, s/he also embraces and lays claim to a past that is most often not taught in school. The rupture of the uprising creates an opening that makes it possible to connect recent and not-so-recent atrocities perpetrated by those in power.

Through the innervations of the collective, popular uprisings tear the dominance of mechanical time and bring into resonance the past liberation struggles not only in discourses and narratives, but in practices as well. Imaginary alliance and alignment with those who struggled for dignity in the past is common in emancipatory political activities, from the anti-colonial liberation struggles to the popular uprisings and movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This diachronic imagination breaks with the chronological time of progress and extends the consciousness in both directions, into the future as well as into the past in a heightened fashion during the uprisings.

Put differently, popular uprisings are a claim to have a voice as a public through action, and it is a claim that also extends to the past. It is a claim that faces the past atrocities that were perpetrated by those in power to quench any resistance to their hegemony, whether colonial, national, or racial in its highlights. It is a claim in the form of rejection, a call to reconsider the dominant historical narratives, abuses of the past for the present, silences, and silencings. This is how history is reclaimed by those who struggle for justice and dignity: by defining the terms of





"On the day that went down in history as the 'Bloody May 1,' 34 people died and 200 people were injured. Those who pass the same place today are not aware of that sinister rendezvous with history."



"Workers with the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK) were at the front of the cortege that was trying to reach Taksim from Besiktas district."

discussing the past, demanding a direct education that is not defined by dominant discourses on the past, and demanding to learn the details of “what really happened”. After all, what is the use of having a voice, if one cannot name the crime, past or present?

The insignia of this diachronic imagination was not the most distinguishing feature of the Gezi Uprising in Turkey that erupted at the end of May 2013. The Gezi Uprising, or “resistance” as it was called in Turkish, was marked by a jubilation that surpassed police violence; a defiant humor that incapacitated the propaganda of the government that was spread through the discourses of the rulers and the concerted effort of the corporate media; and by the diversity of those who participated in it. Yet, the chants and discourses celebrated the beach under the pavement (that was exposed in the early days around Dolmabahçe Palace in Beşiktaş district, Istanbul), and commemorated the past revolutionary martyrs. A moment of silence was often observed for those who were killed in the past struggles in the beginning of gatherings at the neighborhood assemblies. The public was reminded that Gezi Park was a part of a large Armenian cemetery in the past, and articles appeared on the history of the park and the Taksim Square in critical and independent media, informing how the tombstones of the cemetery were used to pave the ground in the back part of the park. The crimes of the state in the form of atrocities, recent and not-so-recent ones, were protested in thousands on their anniversaries, condemned openly and publicly with large participation during the summer of 2013 and into the following year.

## May 1, 2013

Before the onslaught of protests at the end of May, on May 1, 2013, the roads that lead to Taksim Square in Istanbul were closed to vehicle traffic from the early hours of the day. The subway stations around the square were also shut down, the square was off-limits to pedestrians on the International Workers’ Day that became official holiday in Turkey in 2009. Public transportation on the Bosphorus Strait that connects the two sides of the city was also interrupted and the bridge on the Golden Horn, the Galata Bridge, had its double-leaves open in order to block any kind of traffic over it. In this way, the city of more than 15 million residents was put under partial lockdown in order to prevent labor unions and political parties and individuals from reaching Taksim Square to convene for the Labor Day demonstration (Tuysuz and Watson 2013). This came as a surprise as the government had used the occasion to celebrate the “Labor and Solidarity Day” when more than a hundred thousand people marched to the square from all sides in the previous years, 2010–2012, following decades of prohibition of the Taksim Square to Workers’ Day demonstration (Balta 2015).

During the Summer of 2013, the square was a construction site on all corners. The municipality was undertaking the pedestrianization project that aimed to bring all vehicle traffic underground by building tunnels so that the square would eventually emerge as an immense pedestrian-only empty concrete space, adjacent to the Gezi Park, which was also subject to a mysterious urban plan by the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul that pertained to rebuilding a defunct military barracks as a shopping mall that would also include a hotel, according to the speeches of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was the Prime Minister at the time and is the current President of Turkey. Both plans were contested by civil society organizations through legal procedures (Yackley 2013). The shutting down of the city on May 1 was just another blow added to the long list of government’s assault on public places and on public life in general, from restrictions to selling and publicly consuming alcohol, to curtailing internet freedoms, and the recurring suggestion that abortion might be banned.

A series of photomontages on Taksim Square started to circulate on various independent and critical news outlets and websites after the series was posted on the website of the now-defunct national daily newspaper *Radikal*. The collages were created by the graphic designer and artist Füsun Turcan Elmasoğlu and the series were posted under the title “Bellek Kayması” (Lapse of Memory) (Radikal 2013). Elmasoğlu created this series by using old photographic images from past atrocities that took place in the history of Taksim Square and Istiklal Avenue, atrocities that belong to the dark pages of history that has been ignored by official accounts of history (Elmasoğlu n.d.). These atrocities have left a deep mark in the society as the perpetrators have not been found and the involvement of a “deep state” has remained as a plausible scenario. The B&W archival photos that pierce through the colored current-day images of the same locations is a reminder of the atrocities that are not really past, and that these popular locations that are frequented by thousands daily are scenes of unsolved crimes.

A portion of the series pertain to the Bloody May 1, as it was referred to in Turkey, to May 1, 1977 when around half a million people convened at Taksim Square, coming from all directions in processions, and listened to the leaders of the labor organizations who spoke on the stage. Many witness accounts claimed that some assailants opened fire on the crowd from the rooms of a high-rise hotel and from the top of the old stone cistern before the speeches ended, and then a stampede broke out as the security forces charged into the crowd with armed vehicles which left 36 to 42 people dead (Mavioğlu and Sanyer 2007). Evidence and legal investigation were buried and the Bloody May 1 was the beginning of the escalation of big massacres that were used as an excuse for the 1980 military coup in Turkey. Following the coup, the oppressive junta regime shut down and outlawed political parties, labor unions, associations and organization, and





"Hundreds of soldiers who arrived at the Taksim Square after the crowd was dispersed gathered around the nowdefunct bayonet sculpture which was the symbol of May 27 (1960)military coup."



"Those who unleashed a blood bath on the square were tipping cars over and burning them as they fled."

established a new constitution whose legacy was taken over by the later elected governments, leaving a deep impact up to this day (“Remembering the 1980 Coup” 2017).

In the years after the coup of 1980, it was publications that played the major role in the radical education of the public, literary as well as journalistic publications, humour magazines during the 80s, particularly about the struggles and atrocities that were perpetrated or facilitated by state officials and security forces. Such public education gains a special importance when the dominant narrative about these purposefully unsolved atrocities either puts the blame on the victims, downplays the magnitude or significance of the incidents, or downright denies them. This is the historical significance of Taksim Square and May 1 Labor Day that Elmasoğlu brings to the current time before the Gezi Uprising. During the Summer of 2013 and in the following years, these photomontages circulated on social media and popular websites, reaching a peak on the first day of the month of May in the following years. These images do not only link two moments in the history of the location but also trigger our dialectic imagination toward a better understanding of the circumstances of the current day, with an apprehension on what today resembles that past, and what remains a burden. The restrictions imposed on mobility in the city on the Workers’ Day coincided with the publication of this series on internet websites, and the past that is evoked in these collages started to resonate with the current state of partial curfew in the largest city of the country.

Similar temporal or spatial juxtapositions were frequent in the visual repertoire of the resistance. Narratives and stories are also very important in promoting the imagination, but photographic images are perhaps faster to circulate these days and we depend on them to stimulate our imagination. After all, imagination is not an innate capacity; it is in want of models, examples.

The photomontages of Elmasoğlu can themselves be considered archival material now because the “present-day” in the sphere of the collage has since then changed dramatically. Even though Gezi Park was saved and remains as such, the Atatürk Cultural Center at one end of the square is demolished, and a new large mosque is imposing on the square from the other end, behind the cistern. Physical spaces sustain imagination and provide the physical ground for future possibilities of gathering and relating to each other. Physical spaces also sustain the communities and their practices without which the square is only a concrete clearing. It is this sustaining that is targeted by the regimes that fear resistance, and the faces of the earth are razed, the narrow streets and nooks are demolished to open wide boulevards and large squares, as it happened in Paris after the revolution and again after the Paris Commune, and more recently in the Kurdish districts in the fall of 2015 and after, such as the razing to the ground of the ancient district of Sur in the city of Diyarbakır (Ayboğa 2019).



Collage that juxtaposes a B&W image from the period of the military coup of 1980 and a current image of mass arrest during the Gezi protests, dated June 16, 2013. Photographers are unknown, the collage maker is anonymous.



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## Short Biography

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