Editorial

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The 2013 protests in Turkey started in late May 2013, initially to contest the urban development plans to redevelop Istanbul-Gezi Park into a complex with new mosque and shopping centre. However, the character of the protests changed quite substantially when the Turkish police attacked protesters with considerable violence, and what started as an environmental protest to save 600 trees in Gezi Park quickly turned into a nation-wide political demonstration against Tayyip Erdogan and his government. Some of those hasty proclamations of a “Turkish Spring” concentrate on Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan’s increasingly anti-democratic and authoritarian ruling style, and compare Erdogan’s rule with Mubarak’s. Some others in the media debated whether the Taksim-Gezi Park protests could be compared to the protests against neoliberalism, such as the 15M movements in Spain, the anti-government protests in Greece, the “occupy” protests in Europe and the Americas.

What do the protests really mean for Turkey? Is this a rebellion against the lack of democracy, voice, and representation? Is the Erdogan’s government promoting a neoliberal agenda with harsh privatizations, urban ‘transformation’ and ‘development’ for the sake of profit for a small number of ultra-rich? Is this the reason why people were protesting? And finally, what do the protests in Turkey tell us about democracy and Islam? To provide convincing and clear answers to such questions is perhaps not possible yet as we may need more time to digest all the aspects and consequences of the events. However, one of the more positive effects of these events has been to stimulate much serious discussion about them, and thus about the right to use urban commons, how public investments are allocated, the distinction between urban public goods and urban commons, and more importantly about the urbanization of capital.

This collection of essays examines both the eruption of the conflict around Taksim-Gezi and the escalation of it into a nation-wide anti-government conflict. It looks at the origins and wider implications of the conflict as well.

The essays here do not constitute a unified perspective on what happened (and why) in late May-June 2013 in Turkey, and the government’s response to it. They are perhaps most usefully read as an experiment in writing contemporary history as it evolves. Some contributions here contradict others, some are quite specific, and some others generalise more broadly. They all assert, however, that there is no simple answer to difficult questions around the recent events in Turkey, only a complex braid of explanatory factor that have yet to be fully considered.