

The Gezi Protests, Polyphony and ‘Carnavalesque Chaos’

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The Gezi Park protests near Istanbul’s Taksim Square quickly became a media phenomenon, attracting international media outlets such as the CNN, which aired the protests, live for hours. The fact that the police reacted harshly to the protesters became the vantage point of criticism against PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was now increasingly being seen as an authoritarian figure. While some print media gave a balanced account of the protests and the government’s stance on the issue, there were two different extremes in depicting the government’s position; one position held that Erdogan was right in everything he did (including the police’s disproportionate use of tear gas and water cannon) and another extreme position which, in an Orientalist fashion, projected the image of an ‘Oriental despot’, a dictator (with images of Hitler and Ottoman Sultans), on Erdoğan. As an academic and a balanced observer I have chosen not to adhere to either extreme position. Furthermore, I argue that instead of focusing on the personality or character of Erdoğan (praising or ridiculing his person) by following these two camps, we should pay utmost attention to understanding the nature of the Gezi protests, to be able to make sense of this unexpected upheaval. In this sense, I would like to emphasise three concepts that I think can aid us in analysing the protests, namely the concepts of the ‘Bakhtinian carnival’, ‘polyphony’ and ‘Rabelaisian laughter’.

‘Carnavalesque Chaos’

Taksim Square as the first venue of the Gezi Park protests became a gathering where the concept of the ‘carnival’ (as understood by Bakhtin) as an ambivalent process could be observed. In this sense, the protests have operated so far as a ‘carnival’, turning everything upside down as a rebellious upheaval initially against the government’s decision to re-build the Topcu barracks on the Gezi Park area. However, the protests eventually transformed into an upheaval against the government’s perceived restrictions in a few sensitive issues, such as alcohol consumption (which the government argued was a regulation in line with EU standards) and ultimately, with the involvement of marginal political and activist groups, an upheaval against the current government as a whole, with calls to the people asking them to ‘topple’ Erdoğan.

As per Bakhtin, the ‘[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people’.² As a ‘special condition’ and as ‘the people’s second life’, the carnival also can be exempt of some of the societal rules and restrictions.³ Gezi Park protests’ carnival-like qualities

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² Bakhtin, M. (1984) *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p.8.

³ Op.cit. pp.7-8.

are reflected in the group dancing together (folkloric dances like the popular ‘halay’) and drinking. Further, the participants try things they might not have tried before in a carnival fashion, which shows one of the functions of the carnival, as an escape from daily realities and restrictions: graffiti, bowdlerized humour, political cartoons, use of twitter and other social networks, and the use of swearing and inflammatory language through these networks to criticize those in authority. All of these elements point to the fact that through the Gezi Park venue as a site of what I prefer to call ‘carnavalesque chaos’, the disparate groups that participated in the protests found a means to express their disappointment with the recent restrictions (which they perceive variously as an attack on their lifestyles, an attack on ‘secularism’, or laïcité) by expressing themselves in ways that can be perceived as defying cultural and societal mores.

The Vulnerability of Polyphony and ‘Rabelaisian Laughter’ in the Protests

In Bakhtin’s view, Rabelaisian laughter signifies a quality of laughing in the face of authority. In his analysis, Bakhtin identifies ‘Rabelaisian laughter’ in the figures or images of parody and laughter from the medieval concept of the carnival, and from François Rabelais’s work. Perhaps most importantly, the figures and images in examples of the genre of parody meant that there was no central and authentic perspective, or in Bakhtin’s words, no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face.⁴ The Gezi Park protests also became a venue of laughing in the face of authority from the first day, with humorous cartoons of penguins (criticizing one national channel for showing a documentary about penguins instead of the protests) going viral. As the protests continued over a fifteen day period, it has also become clear that in line with the Bakhtinian notion of ‘polyphony’, there was no central authority among the protesters, nor there was a hierarchical structure to restrict views and silence unwanted voices. But this polyphony of voices in the protests also meant that the demands of the protesters became blurred, and became vulnerable to the provocations of dissident groups. As I was writing these (13 June), the provocateurs were said to have been repelled from the Taksim Square with another harsh crackdown by the Riot Police. The media reports held that there were only the peaceful protesters left in the area. As of today (16 June), the police entered Taksim Square for the last time and dispersed all protesters from the area. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is not meant as a concept to be understood as a spectacle, but as an occasion which its participants equally share and experience, ‘while [the] carnival lasts’.⁵ As such, instead of viewing the protests as a spectacle to be closely watched, politicians should be able to understand that the protests were a shared experience. This was recognized when the Prime Minister invited the representatives of the protests to talk about their issues and come to a common understanding. However, when there was another police crackdown after the talks, this was received with anger and mixed reactions and created question marks regarding the government’s approach towards the protests.

⁴ Bakhtin, M. and Holquist, M. (eds.) ([1981] 1998) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press. P. 273.

⁵ Bakhtin, M. (1984) *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p.8

Finally, the protests also became a venue for disproportionate use of misinformation and fabricated news, and particularly the use of provocative images and photographs that were taken at different occasions unrelated to the events. While the harsh criticism of police's disproportionate use of force was justified, the use of misinformation to inflate the police crackdown was another reality of the protests. In this sense, the polyphony of the protests made them open to the highly political attempt of separatist and oppositional groups monopolising the protests for their own goals of creating chaos and dealing a blow to the current government.