

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

“Against fascism, legs to shoulders!”: Choreographic Contestations and LGBT Spatial Tactics in Istanbul's 2013 Gezi Park Demonstrations

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rk9n2ps>

Author

Stoeckeler, Kristen

Publication Date

2014-04-01

Kristen Stoeckeler
Theatre Historiography
Department of Theatre Arts and Dance
University of Minnesota
2014

“Against fascism, legs to shoulders!”: Choreographic Contestations and LGBT
Spatial Tactics in Istanbul's 2013 Gezi Park Demonstrations

On the morning of May 31th 2013 Istanbul police, outfitted in riot gear, stormed a small encampment in Gezi Park. The encampment developed out of a sit-in protest that had been established to protest the government's plans to raze the park to make way for the development of a shopping mall, mosque, and Ottoman-style military barracks housing a military museum. The sit-in was symbolic of dissent, as well as functioned as a tactical maneuver, physically blocking the razing of the park by placing bodies in the way of bulldozing equipment. On this particular morning, the fifth morning of the sit-in¹, Istanbul police raided the encampment, dispersing the protesters using pepper spray on them at close range and firing water cannons known as TOMAs, finally managing to push all protesters out of the park grounds. While “crowd control” technologies like pepper gas and water cannons were used in the days proceeding this particular day, and indeed only a month earlier during annual May Day demonstrations in adjacent Taksim Square, this particular day marked a turning point in the development of what would become Turkey's largest popular uprising in a generation.

As demonstrators reported the police violences through social media and called for popular support, more and more people joined the efforts to return to the park in support of the growing number of dissidents. As the day wore on the pressurized pepper-spray canisters turned to pepper-gas canister launchers, the TOMA water laced with pepper spray to produce

the effect of chemical burns as the water came into high velocity contact with people's skin and eyes. By night fall, the original couple hundred protesters that had been reported at the encampment turned into a demonstration of thousands in Istanbul alone, not to mention those assembled in cities across the country, assembling in protest of the police actions over the last days in Gezi Park and Taksim Square, but also in growing public opposition to Turkey's primary party in government for the last decade, the Justice and Development Party [note: commonly referred to as the AKP], its neoliberal policies and what is described as the increasingly authoritarian political maneuvering of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The events of day five initiated over 24 hours of conflict between demonstrators and the police. The police kept launching pepper gas and the protesters never went away. 36 hours. Dawn to dawn to dusk, the pepper gas blowing downhill, seeping through the cracks in apartment windows, closed in spite of the 90 degree Fahrenheit weather, people walking around with swollen eyes, lemon and baking soda solution crusted to their cheekbones to soothe the burns, taking refuge in small shops with no possibility of fresh air, the gas wafting in, the coughing, the inability to stop coughing, the inability to escape. The stampedes of people running, people protesting and people not protesting, panicked and triggered to run by something, a gas canister, a round of rubber bullets.

This story is too unwieldy to tell in the time I have here today; it twists and turns, accusations are thrown, lines are drawn and redrawn, tactics change and change again; there is dissent, and consensus, and conflicting demands, in many areas of the city, in many places of the country, taking many forms, actions and routines, embodied and not-too-embodied. I tell this story at the risk of omitting important details; at the risk of telling a one-sided story, of angering those that take a stand on the justification of the demonstrations and their purpose,

whether or not they had a purpose, whether or not the original small encampment, or the subsequent occupation of thousands, should have been allowed to remain, and if not, how best to disperse those camped there. I worry for and bemoan not just the lost twists and turns, but the *details* of the moments that will drop out. I can't describe in enough detail the changes that life in central districts of Istanbul--Beyoğlu, Şişli, Kadıköy--witnessed over the summer of 2013, to say nothing of the other 78 cities and towns that saw summers of protest and civilian-police conflict. Rather than discuss the multiple messy histories that led up to this moment, the transnational echoes in Gezi Park, or the significance of the demonstrations to party politics and representative democracy, I want to focus on the bodies present in these moments, the moments where conflicting visions and demands of and for space emerge, and I want to focus on the choreographic tactics employed during this time to assert these visions, and what they tell us about conflict, alliance, and this concept of public space.

I follow in particular the tactics of Istanbul's LGBT movement during the Gezi Park demonstrations. The organized LGBT presence was a central component of the demonstrations and park occupation and those affiliated with LGBT movement in Istanbul had clear reasons to protest. For one, Gezi Park is a famous meeting place for gay men, transgender women and others seeking queer companionship and sex. The wider area of Beyoğlu itself is a hub for LGBT movement organizing and social activity, hosting most of Istanbul's gay and lesbian clubs, bars and cafes, as well as the annual Istanbul Pride Week March which starts in Taksim Square adjacent to Gezi Park and continues along the pedestrian thoroughfare İstiklâl Caddesi. Perhaps more pressing in the moment, however, was the Parliament's rejection of incorporating "sexual orientation" and "sexual identity" into the anti-discrimination clauses of the new Constitution currently in the process of being drafted². The rejection of this proposal, which

would have cemented legal rights for LGBT people in the Constitution, occurred on May 29th, the third day of the Gezi Park sit-in. Two days before the conflict escalated.

LGBT community presence was highly visible all throughout the Gezi Park demonstrations. During the 15-day occupation of the park starting on the night of the sixth day, the LGBT Bloc established itself as strong presence in the ad-hoc community of the the Gezi Park occupation, spreading out over a central lawn of the park, rainbow flags waving, placards broadcasting queer presence and demanding queer respect. Two weeks after the occupation was broken up, at a discussion held as a part of Istanbul Pride Week events, one woman reflected on the importance of the Gezi Park demonstrations to LGBT community in Istanbul saying that it was a time of “rapid teaching” to the wider Gezi Park community about LGBT discrimination and violence against queers, about the injustices endured by a population of people routinely targeted for their sexuality and non-normative gender identities. There were firsthand reports of changes of heart. One woman revealed that after a conversation with a football supporter spouting homophobic rhetoric, the football player returned to the LGBT Bloc to say that he had changed his mind, asking for the acceptance of his apologies, and declaring his vocal support henceforth.

This is just one anecdote of new alliances emerging during the Gezi Park occupation for the LGBT Bloc, most notably between them, the notorious football fan alliance, Çarşı, and a group called the Anti-Capitalist Muslims. The Anti-Capitalist Muslims, opposed to the neoliberal political maneuvering and policies of Erdoğan and the AKP, were also marginalized voices of dissent as conservatively-practicing Muslims. Some of the events said to instigate the Gezi Park protests, such as Erdoğan's policies enacting more conservative liquor laws and the AKP's frequent reliance on religious rhetoric and posturing, are sensitive issues in a country

with an historically contentious relationship between politics and religion. To some extent, the Gezi Park demonstrations also index tensions between political Islam and Kemalism, and everyone falling in-between these two poles, a tension central to Turkish nationhood. For these reasons, public displays of religiosity in Gezi Park, performances representing one of the central criticisms of the AKP's political agenda, had the potential to be instigative and socially divisive within the Gezi Park occupation community. It was reported that the LGBT bloc and Çarşı together teamed up to act as defenders of the Anti-Capitalist Muslims as they prayed in the park, to stand watch and ensure a safe space for prayer in an environment where religion itself was at times under contention to some extent. It has also been reported that adherents of the Anti-Capitalist Muslim group pledged their support to the LGBT movement, specifically to represent at the Pride Week March on the last Sunday of June. These emergent alliances perhaps demonstrate the ways in which the Gezi Park demonstrations do not seamlessly reflect a black and white conflict between a secular Turkey and an Islamic government as the mainstream media would have it.

In the weeks that followed the collapse of the Gezi Park occupation, conflict between the cops and demonstrators escalated and the gassing, rubber bullets, and water cannons, the stampedes, and skin burns and coughing returned and became regularized in life in Beyoğlu, Şişli, and Kadıköy. For two whole weeks crowds would gather to try to reclaim Taksim Square, reach a critical mass, and then be gassed and sprayed out by police. Often times these conflicts would continue until late into the night, groups splintered apart, the cops and demonstrators engaging each other in endless games of cat and mouse through the streets of Beyoğlu. Few arrests occurred during these times even though protesters were frequently cornered. And protesters continued to provoke police violence by assembling, even in numbers

of mere dozens, as if there were possible gains to be made beyond a symbolic register in this. This choreography of cat-and-mouse, though symbolically functional for both sides, also had material impacts, not the least of which was severe economic digs into the two central lesbian clubs in the area which saw most of their income from weekend night patronage. The Saturday night protests continued in spite of the bar owners' appeals to Taksim Solidarity, the organizing body that emerged from the occupation, perhaps signaling the limits of solidarity and the invisibility of the economic as central to the possibilities for LGBT space, indeed the importance of LGBT spaces, in a heteronormative spatial landscape.

While LGBT solidarity fell through the cracks at times, the Pride March saw a turnout far exceeding previous years. Established in 2003, the Istanbul Pride March has grown in size exponentially over the last decade and has sometimes been the target of tactics of police repression, including pepper spray. But the last couple years have seen none to minimal police intervention. Everyone expected a larger march than previous years and this year, of any year, marchers expected police repression. On both accounts, demonstrators were surprised. While it's hard to find consistent estimations, 2013's Pride March saw tens of thousands more marchers than even 2012, which is widely ascribed to the attraction of Gezi Park demonstrators marching in support. At a time when Gezi Park itself was closed, and Taksim Square was effectively shut down to foot traffic, İstiklâl saw the convergence of so many people that by the time the march reached its destination at Tünel, marchers in Taksim were only just starting to walk, a parade of people spanning the whole 1.4 kilometers of İstiklâl. No one could have anticipated the numbers. The number of marchers equaled those of the demonstrations in Taksim square at the outset of the Gezi Park conflicts. And no one could have anticipated that the police wouldn't attack the march to disband it like they had attacked every other

demonstration that had assembled since the day Gezi Park fell to the police. But the police didn't attack. It was a gathering of tens of thousands of people yelling things like, "Against fascism, legs to shoulders!," stopping to boo and throw eggs, tomatoes and rocks at sites of blatant neoliberal development like the Demirören mall, as well as businesses that actively closed their doors to protesters and other people trying to escape the "crowd control" technologies during police attacks. Many of the same slogans used all throughout the Gezi Park demonstrations were sung out during the Pride March and many of the same people were present. It was nothing if not political. And yet the police never attacked. The only demonstration in a month that the police didn't attack.

There's a contradiction here that I think is important to sit with for a minute. The European Union issued a statement praising the Turkish government for not attacking the LGBT Pride March, even as they had just weeks before issued warnings to Turkey to ease up on protesters. This is of course exactly what the Turkish government wants: to look friendly to gays in public even if they refuse LGBT rights behind Parliamentary doors. To not attack the Pride March is itself a symbolic non-action for the state, particularly amongst the high profile attacks on Gezi Park demonstrators. In this way, the Istanbul Pride March is internationally depoliticized and tolerance of it becomes a symbol of humanitarianism and democratic liberalism. LGBT Pride in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe has morphed into a mostly liberal, if not neo-liberalized, ritual, emptied out of strong political claims and demands, colonized by corporate interests promoting identity as commodity, consumption and lifestyle rather than political consciousness and demands. It seems to me that in the midst of the Gezi Park unrest the profoundly politicized Pride March led a hegemonically liberalized yet emptied and depoliticized symbolic life in Western international discourse, the only way in which

dominant LGBT choreographies and spatial tactics tend to operate in the West in general. The symbolism of this non-action bolstered and emboldened an economy of Western liberalism wherein tolerance of gays stands in as the ultimate signifier of justice, pink-washing out other transgressions of other states in the Middle East and Western Europe.

The central question all this raises for me then is this: embracing the contradictions inherent to the choreographies of the police, Gezi Park demonstrators, and LGBT movement in this story, what is the work of each of these choreographic contestations I've sketched here today? I've tried to gesture to some preliminary ways of answering that question. And I've also tried to demonstrate the importance of choreographic analysis to spatial analysis, and the questions such an analysis allows us to ask, questions that go beyond whether or not the demonstrations are efficacious, whether or not they have goals, whether their tactics are justified, and whether their motivations are clear to questions about the function and purpose of public space, the impact a social choreography has on a space and the possibilities for a space, for Gezi Park, for LGBT space, for queer space.

On June 12th, Erdoğan issued a statement saying, “By tomorrow at the latest, the Gezi Park incident will end...This is a public park, not an area of occupation.”³ While the occupation was violently brought to an end, the incident itself, of course, didn't end that day⁴. I want to suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the public-ness of a space, of a park, depends on the possibility of its occupation.