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Do popular assemblies contribute to genuine political change? Lessons from the park forums in Istanbul

By Emel Akçali

Heaven is not a wall made of
custard... It is when people listen
to each other, mind each
other, and recognise each other

**Oğuz Atay, *Tutunamayanlar*
(The Disconnected)**

***Abstract:** By engaging with the 'Gezi/June' uprising in Turkey and the popular assemblies formed in its aftermath, this article foregrounds the notion of agonistic pluralism as advanced by William E. Connolly and Chantal Mouffe for understanding the emerging forms of direct democracy and their outcomes in Turkey. Via participant observation in four park forum sites in Istanbul, in-depth interviews with the participants, and a virtual ethnography on related Facebook sites, it scrutinises the degree to which popular assemblies resist and subvert the existing political order and create alternatives for a radical political change.*

***Keywords:** agonistic pluralism, popular assemblies, Gezi Park, June uprising, Turkey, AKP, right to the city*

In May-June 2013, people who felt marginalised and dispossessed by the socio-political and urban renovation projects of the Turkish government initiated first an Istanbul-based and then a nationwide insurgency which came to be known as the Gezi protests or the June uprising (henceforth, Gezi/June uprising). These included night-long marches and the occupation of squares in various neighbourhoods of Istanbul and other Turkish

cities which were crushed by severe police force and a witch-hunt of activists and social media users. In the aftermath of such violent state response, the Gezi protestors first adopted singular forms of action, such as the ‘standing man’ and ‘standing woman – individuals standing silently for hours at a public site where group manifestations were not permitted. Then, impromptu popular assemblies called ‘park forums’ started to be organised by local people in different neighbourhood parks across Istanbul, as well as in other cities including Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Mersin, and Eskişehir, where ordinary Turkish citizens gathered to discuss their daily problems, rights and freedoms, as well as trajectories for future collective action after the public insurgency.

Just like the public uprisings which had already taken place in Egypt, Bosnia and Ukraine, the popular assemblies in Turkey challenged mainstream practices of democracy, the ones that start and stop at the ballot box. In fact, popular assemblies are usually organised when people feel that corporate interests, religious convictions, authoritarianism and/or militarism begin to dominate the elected governments (Davis 2007). In these circumstances, people want to voice their dissatisfaction directly on burning issues such as corruption, state violence, unemployment, authoritarianism, ecological disasters, or urban gentrifications and not through the intermediary of their political representatives (Melucci 1996; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Goodwin et al. 2001). People may also feel that their political representatives are part of the socio-economic and political problems that they are signaling. Thus, events like popular assemblies, forums, plenums, especially in the ways in which they create alternatives for conventional parliamentary politics, emerge as innovative democratic practices (Antic 2014; Legard 2011; Roos 2013).

Public uprisings as alternative forms of democracy have a long and variegated tradition. Latin American post-neoliberalism practices such as *presupuesto participativo* (participatory budgeting), *municipios autónomos* (autonomous municipalities) and *usos y costumbres* (indigenous customs and practices) (Wolff 2013) have in particular

inspired the formation of popular assemblies worldwide. Regarding the formation of plenums following the 2014 public uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Antic (2014) suggests that when a popular uprising is underway, people want and need to meet and discuss the way forward by forming popular assemblies, as happened for instance in the Paris Commune of 1871, in the Soviets of workers, peasants, and soldiers of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the workers councils of the Vietnamese Revolution, and other mass organisations during the Cuban Revolution.

In her piece on Egypt's popular committees, El-Meehy (2013) also suggests how the thrust of these committees reside in their being informal, voluntary and locally rooted and flexibly organised. In the case of Turkey, public forums formations and practices were largely experienced in the 1970s, under the influence of a strong leftist movement. In 1977, for instance, some leftist police officers formed a society called *Pol-Der*, to discuss their working hours, salaries and uniforms with ordinary citizens and help establish the notion of *Halkin Polisi* (People's Police) in public discourses (Öner 2004). Such political practices were brutally crushed and made illegal by the 1980 coup d'état.

Despite the enthusiasm and the courage of ordinary people who wish to take the destiny in their own hands, it is still not clear whether popular assemblies in the form of park forums, committees or plenums offer an alternative for genuine political change. By engaging with the concept of agonistic pluralism as advanced by Connolly (1991; 1995; 1999; 2005; 2010) and Mouffe (1993; 2000; 2013), this paper aims to respond to this question while scrutinising the degree to which popular assemblies have managed to resist and subvert the political status quo in Turkey. Empirically, the paper relies on a multi-method research design based on participant observation in four park forum sites in Istanbul between July 2013 and August 2014, on in-depth interviews with participants, and virtual ethnography of online communities and Facebook sites of the Istanbul's park forums.

In what follows, the paper first introduces the notion of agonistic pluralism as advanced by Connolly and Mouffe within the realm of postpolitics and scrutinises how this notion may be useful in analysing the emergence of popular assemblies following the Gezi uprising and their contribution to progressive politics in Turkey. Next, it discusses the political divisions and the socio-economic context that has led to the June/Gezi 2013 uprising, which also helps the reader understand the background of the 2016 attempted coup d'état in Turkey. The paper then presents the empirical data and discusses whether popular assemblies could overcome the socio-political deadlock in Turkey and lead to an opening in the 'present neoliberal order of things' (Döşemeci 2014). As part of the discussion, it also addresses what I see are the limits of Connolly's and Mouffe's conceptualisation of agonism in capturing the contribution of popular assemblies to practices of advanced democracy. The concluding section reflects on the space for a genuine political change that popular mobilisations like the park forums might bring about.

Agonistic pluralism: Can it be helpful?

As Fougère and Bond (2016) argue, people have a right to be involved in the decisions that affect them. However, within the context of advanced neoliberalism, democratic contestation and dissent have been raided by postpolitics where progress is argued to be measured by economic growth (Fougère and Bond, 2016, p. 2), 'representations of society tend to be consensual and technocratic' (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014, p. 148) and discord and conflict are often dismissed and delegitimised (Mouffe, 2000a; Žižek, 1999; Rancière, 1998). Both Connolly (2010) and Mouffe (1993), however, observe that the core objective of democracy should be to facilitate an ongoing discursive contestation. Difference and disagreements are constitutive of politics, strife plays a nourishing role, and the principal democratic mission is to transform antagonistic relations into agonistic ones. In Mouffe's (1999, p.755) words,

the “other” is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary”, i.e. somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question’. Democracy’s worst enemy is consequently the essentialist convictions that stipulate the existence of a pre-political common good (Sorenson and Torfing 2007), which according to Connolly (1995) often escapes political contestation.

With such conceptualisation, Connolly and Mouffe part ways with the deliberative democratic theory (Fishkin 1991; Benhabib 1992, 1996; Dryzek 1990), based on Habermas’s (1984;1987) theory of communicative action, which advocates that democratic societies should aim at generating consensus and that consensus is conceivable if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and act rationally. Mouffe, however, advocates that ‘every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilisation of power and that always entails some form of exclusion’ (1999, cited in Bond 2011, p. 167) since, in the words of Bond (2011, p. 169), ‘the social is always potentially conflictual and antagonistic’. Deliberation and consensus-making among equal groups are hence illusory. According to Cerny (2009), though, agonistic understandings of democracy have serious shortcomings, because without shared values, institutional superstructures and interstate pressures, they may introduce ‘destabilising elements that were seen in Europe between the two world wars and in the first wave of failed postcolonial constitutions’ (Cerny 2009, p. 781). The most common charge against agonistic pluralism is hence that of relativism and its inability to come with the firm decisions needed to address the most difficult problems, since it allegedly abandons the certainty of fixed standards and institutionalised procedures in favour of a more open-ended set of values (Bleiker 2008, p. 135).

Mouffe (2009, pp. 551-552) neither dismisses such concerns nor the argument that a pluralist democracy requires a certain amount of consensus and allegiance to the

values which constitute its 'ethico-political' principles. Although she mentions 'equality and liberty as important ingredients', Mouffe does not however specify adequately what these principles are (Erman, 2009, p. 1043). She stands firm on her assertion that ethico-political principles can only be constituted through many 'different and competing interpretations' of various political groups such as, for instance, liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal and radical-democratic (Mouffe 2000, p. 103). Hence, each political group should try to implement its own version of consensus and hegemony by proposing its own interpretation of the 'common good', forming competing forms of citizenship identification (Mouffe 2000, p. 104).

Moreover, according to Mouffe, institutions should deal with transforming antagonism into agonism, by providing channels through which collective passions can express themselves, because 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards democratic designs' (Mouffe 2000, p.103). Thus, she advocates that an alternative political order can only be actualised through meaningful engagement with the institutions of the existing order. The discontents should recognise the contingent character of the hegemonic configurations of the present order and adopt their tactics which include the disarticulation of existing practices as well as the creation of new discourses and institutions (Mouffe 2005, p. 33). Many contemporary social revolts, including the Arab Spring, have generally tried to circumvent the state and other institutions; but such moves risk putting the participants' endeavours in a position where they 'will not be able to bring about any significant changes in the structures of power' (Mouffe 2013, p.77).

Connolly on the other hand tries to sidestep the accusation of being relativistic by emphasising the difference between 'politics of being' and 'politics of becoming' and by advocating that the biggest dangers to democracy stem not from relativism or the lack of rules, but from approaches that uphold a single point of view (Connolly 1999,

Bleiker 2008, p. 137). Connolly hence understands democracy not in institutional terms, but as an ethos that seeks to postpone the moment of decision to enable openness in political life (Schaap 2006, p. 270). In Connolly's conceptualisation, 'democracy should primarily be seen as an attitude, a cultural disposition' (Bleiker 2008, p. 137), and the democratic ethos that he wants to foster is not based on a set of fundamental principles, but on the need to disturb these principles. Moreover, the non-existence of an institutional enterprise is perhaps one of the greatest merits of the agonistic vocabulary (Tambabaki 2011, p.578), although forming and/or reaching a pluralist democratic ethos is not an easy task. This is mainly because of deeply entrenched socio-psychological dispositions in people, which provoke resistance against pluralist ways of being (Tambabaki 2012). Connolly claims that actors are driven by their desire to experience their respective identities as wholeness and consequently perceive unanticipated shifts (forms of pluralist thinking) disrupting the status quo as threatening. (Tambabaki, 2012).

Another challenge that agonistic pluralism faces is the fact that although both Connolly and Mouffe advocate endeavours 'that aim to bring about radical structural change, little attention is paid to the economic, material and institutional obstacles that block its realisation' (Howarth 2008, p. 189). As Howarth rightly underlines, thinkers such as Mouffe and Connolly are concerned with the questions of social, political and economic equality in the age of postpolitics and advanced capitalism, they do not contemplate 'concrete alternatives to late-capitalist forms of domination and exploitation' (Howarth 2008, p. 90). In his later work, however, Connolly (2008) confronts the 'evangelical-capitalist resonance' machine in the US, which he argues resonates with the ethos of greed, weakens diversity and generates widespread economic inequality. He calls the Democratic Left to stand against the conservative hegemony over American religious and economic culture and try to place instead egalitarianism and environmental concerns on the political agenda. The Democratic Left should act to revive 'an enabling

picture of the state and government, which can lead on key issues, and then mobilise subjects in particular ways' (Howarth, 2011, p. 221). Just like Mouffe, Connolly therefore sees in the state the legitimate potential to bring about a genuine change. In the light of this discussion, in the following sections I shall scrutinise the ways in which Connolly's and Mouffe's conceptualisations may be useful in analysing the contribution of the park forums to progressive politics in Turkey.

Paths that led to the Gezi Uprising

Over the last fifteen years, the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) has been the ruling party in Turkey. The secularist Kemalists,¹ the conservative nationalists and a segment of socialists have acted as the AKP's main adversary bloc (Önis 2009; Akçalı 2009). Secularist Kemalists voiced their concern about the rise of religious conservatism in Turkey (Sommer 2007); together with the conservative nationalists, they were also concerned by the decentralisation of the Turkish state as part of the EU harmonisation process, the softening of the state intransigence towards Kurdish political claims and the transformation of traditional Turkish foreign policy, especially towards Cyprus. Finally, the socialists had concerns over the benefits of economic growth, which they argued had been unevenly distributed, and over AKP's policy of increasing local government services and charity-based organisations rather than using state-based forms of redistribution (Önis 2009).

Despite such opposition, in July 2007 the AKP attained a second ground-breaking victory and, ever since, has started drifting away from the EU, concentrating instead on its domestic political agenda and new foreign policy, which soon turned Turkey into a regional trading power (Kirişçi 2009). In 2008, the Turkish Constitutional Court tried to ban the AKP because of its 'provocative' moves against the Turkish state's secular principles. They eventually decided to only warn the AKP government about its alleged intentions. Yet, soon after this case, the Istanbul High Criminal Court

launched a widespread operation, *Ergenekon*, with the aim of eradicating an obscure security and bureaucratic establishment in Turkey ('deep state'), which was allegedly organising a military coup against the AKP government.

The *Ergenekon* prosecutors have linked various mafia organisations with almost all eminent Kemalists, secular activists, politicians, military personnel, academics, trade union leaders, judges, journalists and retired generals. They claimed that all these figures were involved in activities to create terror in Turkey and wage a *coup d'état* against the AKP government. Moreover, in February 2010, around 300 retired and serving military officials, including admirals, generals and colonels, were detained and later convicted of plotting a coup in 2003, under a plan code-named 'Sledgehammer'. Both the *Ergenekon* and Sledgehammer cases were heavily criticised by the political opposition, for their numerous legal flaws and the suspected involvement of high-ranking bureaucrats close to the Islamist Hizmet (Service) movement led by an exiled cleric and (then) AKP ally Fethullah Gülen.² These developments led to an entrenched polarisation in the Turkish society between opponents and sympathisers of the AKP and a deep sense of grievances against its government (Akça and Paker-Balta 2013).

Despite the polarised political environment, during the AKP's rule, Turkey has experienced a period of significant economic growth (7.5 per cent per annum during 2002-2006), assisted by a highly favourable global liquidity and low inflation (Önis, 2009). This has played a significant role in consolidating the AKP's electoral success. Since the AKP came to power, almost all the religiously conservative groups, including the Gulen movement, have become significant actors in the institutionalisation of a neoliberal economic hegemony in Turkey, all benefiting from the principle of enlarging civic engagement in the economy (Atasay, 2009). Power has hence shifted both within the business community and the state towards groups with religious-conservative rather than Kemalist-secular affiliations (Bugra and Savaskan 2014). It is within such

structural transformation of dominant power relations and paradigms that one can easily situate AKP's rise and consolidation of power in Turkey (Cizre 2008, p. 3).

Such a transformation has also manifested itself at the urban scale. As eloquently argued by Çınar (2005), the conservative ideology in Turkey has always generated an alternative modernisation project and AKP has started employing similar techniques to those of the Kemalist modernists to institutionalise an alternative version of a nationalist model. In collaboration with TOKI (the State Housing Administration) operating under the Prime Minister's office, the municipality of Istanbul has demolished traditional neighborhoods to build highways and high-rise buildings, eventually pushing the working class to peripheral areas (Karaman 2013). Moreover, AKP has promoted a conservative and authoritarian vision of nationhood through the planning of new monuments (Akçalı and Korkut 2015). As part of this vision infused with an admiration for the imperial and Islamic Ottoman past, in November 2012, the mayor of Istanbul announced that a new version of the old Ottoman Artillery Barracks and a shopping mall would be built in place of Gezi Park, the only remaining green area in Istanbul's city centre.

The AKP's re-organisation of urban scape and social engineering became highly contested by a variety of Turkish citizens, further boosting grievances against the AKP and especially its leader Erdoğan, who started using an increasingly condescending tone against its opponents. After years of struggles against the negative effects of AKP's conservative social engineering and neoliberal urban transformation (Akçalı and Korkut 2015, p. 86), this enabled various civil society groups to better reach out to a significant portion of urban population in Istanbul in the name of the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 2008). Grievances were also voiced over the rising socio-economic inequalities, the lack of freedom (press, expression, assembly), the dismantling of the secularist establishment, the disrespect for the symbols, traditions and founders of the Turkish Republic and the lack of transparency concerning crucial political

developments such as the Kurdish peace process and the Turkish support given to the Syrian opposition throughout the ongoing civil war in Syria. All these claims and grievances together spurred the nationwide insurgency in May-June 2013, which came to be known as the Gezi protests or the June uprising.

“Dude, don’t be scared. It’s us. The people”: Practicing agonism through popular assemblies³

During the Gezi protests, besides AKP’s traditional opponents, ordinary people ‘took on tasks outside their areas of expertise and became a reporter, a medic, a construction worker, a food distributor, and so on to contribute to the uprising’ (Döşemeci 2014). Tüfekçi (2013) observed: ‘I’ve seen Muslim groups praying in Gezi while a woman with crewcut, punk haircut - clearly not part of ‘them’ - shooed away journalists trying to take pics, which she thought was not respectful of their praying... I have seen feminists conduct workshops in Gezi - specifically targeted to soccer fans - on why they should not use misogynistic insults’. The LGBT community and football fans were also central in both the defense and the occupation of the Gezi Park. The Kurdish activists who have been marginalised within formal politics and who have a long history of struggling with the state showed sympathy towards the Gezi protesters, but did not participate in large numbers, due to the ongoing negotiations between the Kurdish political leaders and the Turkish state (Yörük 2015). They tended to stay distant, also because the Gezi protests displayed state symbols such as the Turkish flag and Atatürk’s portrait, to which the Kurdish activists did not feel an affiliation. Nevertheless, pluralism and coexistence were the most significant political values that emerged in both the Gezi protests and post-Gezi politics. It is exactly on this agonistic pluralism, put in practice by the protesters, that I would like now to turn.

In the aftermath of the Gezi uprising, protestors auto-organised popular assemblies in the form of park forums in different neighbourhood parks across Istanbul

and in other major cities in Turkey. People gathered in these forums without being represented by any political formation, organisation or unions. They gathered to convene democratic debates, usually in the evenings, about the ways in which the Gezi movement could orient itself. Social media also acted as a very important player in the dissemination of the park forums' activities, especially when mainstream media completely ignored this process. Information from and within forums was circulated by on-line bulletins such as *Hemzemin Forum Postası* (Hemzemin Forum Mail) (<http://hemzeminposta.org>), *Parklar Bizim* (The Parks are ours) (<http://parklarbizim.blogspot.com>), *Opposition, Now the People are speaking* (<http://muhalefet.org/haber-simdi-halk-konusuyor-12-6602.aspx>) and Facebook groups of the park forums such as *Diren Kadıköy* (Resist Kadikoy) (<https://www.facebook.com/direnyogurtcuparki>), *Cihangir Parkı Forumu* (<https://www.facebook.com/cihangirparki>), *Maçka Parkı Forumu* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/mackaforumu/>). Between June and September 2013, there were in total fifty-two park forums in Istanbul, all formed as a result of civic initiative. The forums, which attracted thousands of people in the first formative months, became connected to each other through coordination meetings held every Monday in the Chamber of Architects office in Taksim, Istanbul.

Between July 2013 and August 2014, I participated intermittently in four of these park forums in different neighbourhoods of Istanbul, namely Beşiktaş Abbasağa, Kadıköy Yoğurtçu, Cihangir and Maçka Park. During the same period, I also attended around 15 meetings, activities and demonstrations organised by the park forums in Kadıköy, Beşiktaş and Taksim. I conducted around 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with some of the participants and the coordinators of these forums, whom I recruited via a snowball technique. Joining the social media groups of the forums and closely following the meeting schedules and discussions online also helped the recruiting process. My respondents were of various ages (16-70), although the majority

who attended the park forums were between 18-35 years old; 17 of my respondents were women who actively participated both in the Gezi protests and the park forums. Almost all the interviewees were university students or graduates and they came from various parts of Turkey. Additional data also came from impromptu opinions voiced by the participants of park forums, during or at the margin of workshops organised on specific issues and lectures given by experts on various socio-political and economic problems. Figures 1 and 2 depict the spatial organisation of these sessions at one of the most popular park forums in Istanbul: *Abbasağa*.

(Figure 1 - Abbasağa Park Forum, photo taken by the author on July 13, 2013)

(Figure 2- Abbasağa Park Forum, photo taken by the author on July 13, 2013)

The audience reaction to the presenters was communicated by hand signs that were also used in occupy movements in London, New York, Madrid, and at the World Social Forum meeting I attended in Tunis in April 2013. The hand signs were used especially for not disturbing people living around the parks. However, it was naturally impossible to prevent the rise of tensions during individual speeches, since the public forums were open to a great diversity of people, pertaining to different ideologies, education levels, backgrounds, ethnicities etc. At the same time, though, there was a spontaneous effort, much like in the Gezi Park occupation process, to preserve the culture of dialogue and acceptance rather than resorting to conflict and violence. Hate speech was not allowed, but those who employed it were not immediately chased away either. During a panel organised on the Kurdish question with the participation of various Kurdish activists in the Yoğurtcu Park forum in Kadıköy, in July 2013, a group of youngsters offensively disrupted the meeting by arguing that they had heard that the ‘terrorists’ had infiltrated their neighborhood and they were not willing to allow this to happen.

The forum organisers invited them to the meeting and said that they were ready to answer their questions as long as they were willing to voice their concerns peacefully.

Although the participants of the forum including myself were all intimidated by the youngsters who looked like a group of thugs, after a period of negotiation, the conflict was resolved peacefully and the youngsters eventually joined the forum and conversed with the Kurdish activists. On another evening in July 2013, as I left the Abbasağa Park forum around midnight in Beşiktaş, a historical quarter on the European side of Istanbul and took the boat to cross to the Asian side, a group of young musicians started spontaneously playing musical instruments traditional of the Black Sea region in Turkey and singing a protest song against the government. It was past midnight but almost all the passengers in the small boat participated in this protest song by clapping, cheering and even dancing and showed appreciation for this act of resistance of the youngsters.

The discussions in the forums also included identifying a common strategy especially concerning the right to the city, more transparent urban transformation and the removal of ‘the election threshold that marginalises many political parties’ and ‘is widely seen as the reason for the lamentable representation of social diversity in the Turkish parliament’ (Inceoğlu 2013). In December 2013, when a huge corruption scandal broke out involving several key people in the Turkish government, including the then Prime Minister Erdogan’s son, the forums that I had attended, amongst others, organised night-long marches in several quarters of Istanbul, especially in Beyoğlu, the pedestrian street adjacent to Taksim Square. In July 2014, the Yoğurtcu Forum organised a solidarity march for Palestine and protests against the conversions of a public school in Acıbadem into the religious Imam-Hatip school. Most of the forums organised events and campaigns for both the local elections in March 2014 and the presidential election in August 2014.

Although most of the forums had common demands and grievances, they also differed significantly concerning the claims and level of politicisation. In upper middle class neighbourhoods such as Maçka and Cihangir, participants and organisers of the

park forums were also mostly middle or upper middle class individuals, some being lawyers, bankers, doctors and judges, and they were mainly interested in environmental issues rather than more radical socio-economic change and passive resistance. The Gazi, Gülsuyu and Armutlu neighbourhood parks, on the other hand, predominantly consisted of working class participants who were already politicised, sometimes belonging to radical leftist organisations and with longstanding experiences of violent clashes with the state before the Gezi protests.

One of the reasons why the park forums could not continue their existence, according to an activist from the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* - People's Democratic Party) activist, Murat,⁴ who was also a regular participant, was the fact that many park forums especially in the middle and upper class neighbourhoods soon became 'inactive' places, 'a place to kill time for retired people' instead of being transformed into places of active resistance. On the other hand, as confirmed by the main organisers of the Maçka Forum, many people left the park forums because they found them becoming 'too politicised' and dominated by the HDP. It was indeed this apolitical involvement that soon led the park forums to inability. In the words of Murat: 'if the park forums could attain a common political identity, then one could obtain something from them'. However, on the basis of both the interviews I conducted with the participants in each of the four forums and what I could experience myself as an active participant in these forums, rather than a genuine political alternative, like in the case of the Gezi protests, the forums generated a sense of unity in diversity, hence a practice of agonistic pluralism (which was of course not without its own problems when it comes to genuine political change).

According to Yeşim, a female university student, the forums provided a space within which to voice disagreement, especially at the local and bottom-up level, and this could be regarded as their major accomplishment. According to Deniz, a young lawyer, the forums provided a roof under which diverse voices of opposition could find refuge: 'The Gezi as well as the forums

could not form a common political identity because of their own genes...This was not the aim of the movement’.

Did the park forums contribute to genuine political change?

Much in line with the notion of agonistic pluralism advanced by both Connolly and Mouffe, the agonistic collective identity that has emerged within the Gezi protests and the public park forums has been an exceptionally encouraging development for Turkish democratic history. As mentioned above, participants became involved in self-management attempts through collectives and volunteer groups, such as ‘Müşterekler’ (The Commons), which managed ‘a free medical centre, a food centre and library, and workshops and activities that aimed to produce a database of oral testimonies and visual records of the protests and police violence’ (Gökarıksel 2013). Traditional liberal and deliberate notions of democracy cannot fully grasp such radical practices of politics, since the participants in the Gezi protests performed a way of imagining democracy and being intelligible through agonistic practices.

However, one also needs to keep in mind that although civil strife enables the creation of an ethos of pluralisation (Connolly 1995) and social disruptions against the existing political order and/or state institutions, it is often illegal. Hence, as accurately argued by Kasper (2014), the pluralistic form of identity labelled *Gezi Ruhu* (Gezi Spirit) and the agonistic practices in the park forums had somehow to compromise and attach themselves to the existing institutions and political parties to survive, much like what Mouffe suggests, since there was indeed no emerging institutionalised political formation in Turkey that could embrace the ‘Gezi Spirit’.

A Gezi Party was formed right after the nation-wide protests, but with no hope of surpassing the electoral threshold of 10%. The Gezi Spirit could also find refuge perhaps in the ‘two other parties that have been enjoying relative popularity among the urban, educated and left-leaning youth, the pro-Kurdish BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* - Peace and Democracy Party)’ (Roos and Leverink, 2014) and the HDP, formed

in October 2013, right after the Gezi protest with a tree as its logo (Fishmen, 2016, p.183). The HDP has attracted several former BDP deputies, due to its attempts to transcend the mainly pro-Kurdish ethnic character of the BDP and has incorporated some Gezi participants among feminists, LGBT activists, ecologists, socialists and non-Muslim minorities (Fishmen, 2016 p. 183). However, many of the participants of the movement and commentators in the social media firmly rejected an attachment to an existing political order. They argued instead that the ‘Gezi Spirit’ challenged not just the AKP but the *entire* political class (Bakiner, 2014, p. 71) ‘and that the only way forward would be to form a new radical party of the left - possibly modeled on the example of Syriza in Greece - that retains a close connection with the movements and breathes some fresh ‘popular’ air into a stale political environment.’ (Roos and Leverink, 2014).

Once an institutionalised common political identity is attained, even if it is going to be an alternative one, undeniably there will always be vanguards who try to shape the newly emerged movement into more formal channels of action. Plus, as Bourdieu (cited in Banegas et al, 2012) argues, the selection of these vanguards would then of course be an outcome of a set of cultural and social conditions based on various forms of power, domination and inequality. Although aware of the existent power dynamics in a consensual decision-making process, Mouffe (1999), in her elaboration of agonistic pluralism, sidelines this crucial shortcoming regarding the institutionalisation of radical politics. It may also be that the ethico-political values that emerged in the Gezi protests and in the park forums, such as participatory democracy, post-neoliberal urban politics, politics of equality and recognition, and human rights (Bakiner, 2014, p. 72-3) may exactly be the institutions that Mouffe is referring to as they are also forms of negotiated norms of engagement.⁵ As Bakiner (2014, p. 73) convincingly argues, ‘the new progressive politics’ that emerged in the Gezi protests, ‘if it ever materialises will be a movement of those who could not stand one another until yesterday’ and this is already

a very progressive norm development forkish societal politics. However, Mouffe is still vague about ‘the institutional, procedural and spatial underpinnings of a radical and plural democracy’ (Howarth, 2008, p. 189). Such elusiveness constitutes therefore one of the major shortcomings of agonistic pluralism, leaving a question mark about how to encounter existing power structures.

Likewise, the park forums were healthy steps towards building an ethos of pluralisation – as conceptualised by Connolly – a genuine agonistic structure in the society ‘which belie[s] any claim to a ‘stable’ or ‘universal’ identity, as well as competing interpretations of equality and liberty, which foreclose the possibility of fully realising either’ (Llyod and Little 2009, p. 6). They also provided safe grounds, as Mouffe (1996) described, where conflict and disagreement could coexist with tolerance and they could all then keep democratic contestation alive. However, when it comes to taking such understanding to a larger segment of the society and expanding it to the AKP constituency, the park forum participants were constrained by political and economic boundaries.

Such a twist is eloquently described by Tugal (2013, p. 157): ‘what really hurts this class [the middle class who participate in the protests and the forums] is not exploitation and impoverishment in absolute economic terms... but the impoverishment of social life. Free market capitalism has actually delivered them its promises: lucrative jobs, luxurious vacations, fancy cars (at least the prospect of), comfortable homes, and many other forms of conspicuous consumption. Yet, none of this has resulted in fulfilling lives. The Gezi movement provided a non-commodified space (the barricades, the public park, the shared meals) where this class momentarily tasted the fruits of a solidaristic life.’

In my fieldwork, I also observed that the middle and upper middle-classes distanced themselves from the protests and the park forums when the working class, who had already had some experience of clashing with the status quo, started more

actively participating in the process. It was thanks to these ‘tough guys’, who could resist and clash with the police fearlessly and break the police blockade of Taksim Square, that people could occupy Gezi park. The eight young protestors who lost their lives during the Gezi protests, because of being hit by gas canisters or ammunitions, were mostly from the marginalised neighbourhoods of Turkey’s major cities. The shop owners, the petit bourgeoisie and the middle class soon distanced themselves from these groups as the protests were prolonged and became more violent (Durak 2013).

The major trade unions, such as the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK), the Public Workers Unions Confederation (KESK), the Turkish Doctors’ Union (TTB) and the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) were quite ineffective in reinforcing the uprising as well (Döşemeci 2014). Even though they declared a general strike on June 5 to show solidarity with the uprising, this was an orderly event, planned much before the uprising and its ‘eventual dispersal was out of tune with the Gezi uprising itself’ (Döşemeci 2014). Some other unions, led by Türk-İş (Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions), took a much more aloof position, alleging the presence of ‘marginal groups’ and the abuse of the demonstrations by ‘those with bad intentions toward our country’ (Döşemeci 2014). Hence, as Döşemeci (2014) very poignantly points out, ‘as long as people keep dutifully showing up at their jobs in the morning; as long as workers - blue-collar, white-collar; partially employed, self-employed [kept] reproducing the preconditions of their own exploitation [...] there can be no long-term arrest of the present neoliberal order of things [and] the split personality of the uprising led, predictably, to stalemate, a stalemate that in hindsight, was advantageous to the government’.

Undeniably, those who were participating in the evening meetings in the parks and organising protest marches, mainly against the ultra-neoliberal policies of the AKP government, were wearing their suits and going to their work places in the new high rise buildings of Istanbul in the early mornings.⁶ It is therefore arguable how ready they

were to change the current order of things and the existing oppressive structures which had created the problems that led to the Gezi uprising in the first place. This conundrum was perhaps the main limitation of the park forums as well as the Gezi uprising, as the most politicised participants of the park forums also agreed. Another significant limitation was the fact that Erdoğan and the governing AKP party, the main targets of the protesters and park forum participants, continued to enjoy majority support, as confirmed by the local and presidential elections that took place, respectively, in March and August 2014. This suggests that neither the Gezi protests nor the park forums reflected the demands and grievances of Turkish society in its entirety, as societal polarisation persevered. To be fair, one should also take into consideration the successful communication strategy of the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who portrayed the Gezi protesters as ‘marginals’, ‘vandals’ and ‘terrorists’ who entered mosques with shoes and drank alcohol in there. Meanwhile, the prime minister characterised his own supporters as the faithful ‘nation’. The transformation of the AKP into a potent, consolidated power has indeed followed the Gezi protests (Dedoğlu and Aksakal 2014, p. 255). One also needs to consider that an important segment of the Kurdish population did not give their support to the Gezi protesters and did not participate actively in the park forums, since the ongoing peace process with the Turkish state and the Gezi and the park forums’ socio-political plurality did not capture the heart and mind of the Kurdish constituency, except perhaps in a few cases. This fact is another significant indication that agonistic pluralism is not without its limits in terms of understanding the ‘pulse’ of the ‘nation’ or who the ‘people’ really is. Popular assemblies in their various forms are certainly ‘very old means of direct democratic organisation of the oppressed during times of protests, rebellions, strikes and revolutions (like the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, 1936 in Catalonia or 1956 in Hungary)’ (Kapovic 2014). However, since the 19th century, the most common expression of scepticism about direct democracy, democratic organisations and popular assemblies has concerned the

impossibility of gathering together all the citizens of any modern state for discussion and voting on policy proposals (Newton, 2012). Against such cynicism, some scholars claim today that the emergence of social media has increased ordinary people's capacities, not only for interactive discussion, but also for actual involvement in action (Loader and Mercea 2012). Yet, social media can also turn into a polarised arena and have their own dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

Both Connolly and , in their conceptualisation of agonistic pluralism, seem to neglect these structural limitations which usually manifest themselves as class hierarchies and social inequalities. As also highlighted by Stratford et al. agonistic pluralism is well aware of the power differentials in society, but 'it does not resolve the problem of power in practical terms that are accessible to members of the local communities' (2003, pp. 469-70). It is also true, as mentioned above, that Connolly antagonises the 'evangelical-capitalist resonance' machine in this later work (2008) and calls for political action against it. However, like Mouffe, he also sees state institutions as allies in tackling socio-economic and other inequalities. We all know well however that within the capitalist state structure there is always a class which holds the supremacy in the economic organisation of society, 'measured by ownership of and control over the productive assets of society' (Öncü 2003, p.324). In an era of intensified capitalist processes in the context of neo-liberal globalisation, the capitalist and capitalising state will not make concessions regarding 'the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling class' (Öncü 2003, p. 323) They will consequently continuously create instances of exclusion and counteract the creation of an agonistic environment, because such an environment would not secure and/or protect the interests of a class or group.

Also for Karl Polanyi, counter movements may not always come with a morally and politically acceptable package (Unsar, 2016, p. 280), and genuine political action and change may perhaps find 'expression through political violence from the margins

(Swyngedouw, 2011, pp. 372-3). Once again, a revolutionary socio-political transformation depends heavily ‘on the political agency of class forces having attained a certain degree of leadership and cohesion in countering the advances of neoliberal development’ (Berberoğlu 2010, pp. 127-128). Thus, in order to avoid the vicious circle that engagement with the capitalist state creates for progressive politics, agonistic politics needs perhaps to embrace antagonism (Ayan Musil, 2014) against unequal social and political structures. Such antagonism does not need to mean resorting to violence, but should not be about distributing blame about inequalities and oppression equally either when such blame’s one-sidedness is obvious.

Drawing upon the Gezi and the park forums example, antagonism is most likely to mean class alliances against oppressive and unequal social structures which have the potential to harm all sides with the same cruelty in the last instance. Antagonism should also mean including those who benefit the least from unequal social structures in the decision-making processes. As the experiences of the Gezi uprising and the park forums suggest, here the middle class needs to assume some historical responsibilities and respond truthfully to such questions as: how much of their comfort are they willing to forsake to struggle together with more disadvantaged classes? And how much power are they willing to share so to be able to live together in a more just, equal and solidaristic society which all sides may benefit from in the long run?

Conclusions

Focusing on Turkish society’s encounter with advanced practices of democracy, this paper has scrutinised whether the popular assemblies created in the form of park forums after the Gezi uprising in Turkey could resist and subvert the existing political order and generate alternatives for a radical political change. The findings suggest that the specific historical situation in Turkey during and after the Gezi/June uprising has captured the momentum of ‘agonistic pluralism’ as described by Connolly and Mouffe and disrupted

a decade-long polarisation in the country. Besides the traditional political opponents of the AKP party, ordinary people became involved in the public strife and popular assemblies and managed to form an ethos of pluralisation.

As my field observation and active participation in the park forums suggest, however, rather than genuinely challenging the ongoing power structures in the current socio-political and economic order of things and offering a genuine political alternative, the park forums helped nourish a pluralistic ethos in the society and provided safe grounds where disagreements could be peacefully negotiated. Agonistic pluralist practices could not go beyond this stage, however, because of the existing and constraining socio-economic and class structures. The unproblematised class divide between the participants and the organisers of park forums and the different degrees to which these people were affected by existing socio-economic exploitation and impoverishment hindered genuine practices of agonistic politics and consequently the formation of radical political alternatives. At this juncture, the notion of agonistic pluralism could not resolve the problem of power in practical terms either, just like the deliberate notions of democracy.

Hence, rather than concentrating all efforts on the importance of interaction and articulatory practices of human agency for the development of agonistic pluralism, agonist theorists need first to problematise the unequal socio-political and socio-economical structures that constitute the sites of agonistic politics. They also need seriously to engage with the ways and/or tactics through which the current constraining structures can be countered and reversed for agonistic politics to be able to offer a genuine alternative. After all, as suggested by Manolis Glezos, the 90-year-old Greek WWII resistance hero who experimented with direct democracy when he was mayor of a village on the island of Naxos, for direct democracy models to survive, they need to spread to the neighborhoods and workplaces, because ‘only then will we start seeing the emergence of a genuinely democratic society’ (Roos 2013), as well as collective social

imaginaries and progressive means of political involvement. The lack of such engagement leads to the limits of social mobilisations and uprisings and their future potentialities. Nevertheless, we all know well that genuine socio-political change does not develop easily but requires immense human effort (Szolucha 2014). It is hence still too early to conclude in despair and give up to a culture of hopelessness.

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¹ Kemalists are the followers of an ideology introduced by the Turkish national movement leader Mustafa K. Atatürk in the 1920s. Kemalism defines the basic characteristics of the Republic of Turkey, namely republicanism and secularism.

² Fethullah Gülen's support was vital to AKP's initial successes especially in its struggle against the secular Kemalist establishment. Soon after AKP consolidated its power, the Gülen movement became a rival, most probably over the gains of Turkey's economic growth and control over state bureaucracy (Başaran, 2013). Today, the Turkish State and President Erdoğan hold Gülen and his movement responsible for the bloody coup d'état which was attempted against the Turkish government in July 2016.

³ 'Korkma La, Biz Halkık': One of the most popular street slogans of the Gezi Uprising.

⁴ All names of interviewed participants used in this article are fictitious.

⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this eye-opening suggestion.

⁶ I personally interviewed some of my respondents who were participating in the evening park forums in their business suits.

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