Radicalisation of Politics and Production of New Alternatives: Rethinking the Secular/Islamic Divide after the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey

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1. Introduction

My presentation today explores the constitutive impact of Turkey’s month-long Gezi Park protests on producing recognition politics between historically contending ‘secular’ and ‘Islamic’ socio-political identities and lifestyles. I define the Gezi Park protests as a historical moment when politics is radicalised, through the rigidification of political frontiers between the AKP Government and the urban population that contest its Islamic neoliberal projects in redesigning urban Turkish public life. Mainstream actors tend to define the radicalism of the Gezi protests with its ‘anti’-AKP tendency, for these protests were identified as a reaction against the Government’s authoritarian imposition of its project of Sunni Islamic neoliberalism. More often than not, the radicalism in these protests is located not in what it potentially produces, but in what it contests. Therefore, the condition of existence of the constructed ‘Gezi spirit’ is expressed with contestation, rather than production. Consider, for example, the statement of the Minister of Education of the AKP Government, which was released in the first days of the Gezi protests:

‘In five days, we achieved uniting contending social groups under a fog against us. Normally these fractions cannot come together, for it was something that the Parliamentary opposition has worked on for years. When the fog disperses, however, these contending identities will be shocked when they realise that they are sitting next to each other.’

The argument that these diverse and even historically contending identities get on well in Gezi protests was because they were all fighting against their common enemy clearly has a truth dimension. For fighting against the Government was the condition of possibility for these identities to come together in these protests. Nevertheless, I argue that a month long period that they spent together also produced new forms of social interactions and negotiations, which have potential impacts on producing new and alternative possibilities, discourses and projects. As I hope to trace in this presentation with special reference to interactions between secular and Islamic socio-political identities, the Gezi protests have vital constitutive impact on producing recognition politics between these historically contending identities, and therefore radically altering the existing ‘secular/Islamic divide’—which I use to refer to a hegemonic rule dominating the urban Turkish public life for more than three decades now.

2. Contextualising the secular/Islamic divide

The theorisation of the secular/Islamic divide goes back to the 1940s, if not earlier. In the past two decades, due to the emerging public visibility of Islam, contemporary scholars have avoided confining the study of politics to formal institutions and political structures. Rather, they embrace a broader approach to the study of politics by taking the urban public sphere as the main site of political activity. In contemporary Turkey, where politics and lifestyle, public and private, and global and local are intertwined, hegemonic secular and Islamic political projects produce alternative versions of neoliberal modernity, competing identifications of Turkish nation, and contending forms of urban lifestyles accompanying it. The secular/Islamic divide is persistently produced and regenerated through projecting competing forms of lifestyles in towns and cities. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) defines public life as a site for the
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generation of the political. In her influential study analysing the production of the secular/Islamic conflict, Alev Çınar (2005) compares the ways in which the competing secularist-Western and Islamic Turkish national identification projects have been instituted in the public sphere. By looking at the secularist-Westernist and Islamic interventions in bodies, places, and time, she shows how the images of unveiled and veiled women, the Western architecture of Ankara and Islamised Istanbul, and secular and Islamic-Ottomanist versions of Turkish history were produced by secularist and Islamic socio-political actors respectively in contraposition to each other. Similarly, by focusing on memory as a site of political struggle between secularist-Westernist and Islamic projects, Esra Özzyürek (2007) shows how “Islamist activists demonstrate that public memory is not only a ground of cultural reproduction but also a source of resistance to it”.

A common denominator among contemporary scholars is their articulation of the secular and Islamic interventions to urban Turkish public life as methodologically the most important moments in studying the production and regeneration of the secular/Islamic divide. By taking urban Turkish public life as the main site of political activity, recent literature abundantly showed that the secular/Islamic divide is a product of a complex social construction process. Whilst the secular/Islamic divide has come into existence in and through the secular and Islamic socio-political actors’ interventions to urban Turkish public life, the hegemonic secular and Islamic imaginaries have come into play in contraposition to each other.

3. Rethinking the secular/Islamic divide through Gezi Protests: the case of the Earth Tables Protests

The Gezi Park protests and particularly the presence there of Islamic-oriented socio-political identities such as the Anti-Capitalist Muslims provide us an abundance of resources on the transformation possibility of these dominant Islamic and secular imaginaries. As such, the Gezi protests reveal that the urban Turkish public life is not subsumed or exhausted by the hegemonic secular/Islamic divide. These protests open a space for radically altering this hegemonic rule. I would like to discuss this transformation possibility in the light of field research I conducted in what has been called the ‘Earth Tables’ iftar protests. The Earth Tables protests were one of the first political attempts to sustain, channel and regenerate the constructed ‘Gezi spirit’ in the post-Gezi Park context of Turkey. The idea of doing these protests was developed by the Anti-Capitalist Muslims, which actively participated in Gezi protests. In the holy month of Ramadan succeeding the Gezi protests, they invited everyone regardless of whether or not they were fasting, consuming alcohol, Muslim or a believer to parks and streets to modestly practice the ritual of breaking fast. This was to protest the dominant understanding of Islamic neo-liberalism carried by the AKP Government. Nevertheless, the Anti-Capitalist Muslims do not organise the Earth Tables. They rather developed the idea and shared it with social circles through social media. The idea was then embraced by social circles and approximately 50 Earth Tables protests were spontaneously organised in Istanbul and other towns in the Ramadan succeeding the Gezi protests.

3.1. The Earth Tables and the transformation of hegemonic Islamic imaginary

I conducted my field research in two Earth Tables protests organised in the Maltepe and Yedikule regions of Istanbul. My first observation in Maltepe was that the Earth Tables appeared as a simulation wherein secular- and Islamic-oriented socio-political identities politically negotiated to act together. The population in this protest was by no means limited to people who were fasting or leading an Islamic-oriented lifestyle in general. Many participants were eating, drinking water or smoking before the iftar time. Everyone brought food, drinks or deserts to share at the table. Representatives of leftist, anarchist, feminist,
LGBT communities, and football supporter groups were involved. The Maltepe Park, where the Earth Table was set up, was surrounded by photos from Gezi protests and of civilians who lost their lives in protests, as well as by the markers and banners of feminist, LGBT and leftist social and political organisations.

The Maltepe Earth Table is an example of the constitutive impact of Gezi protests on blurring the frontier between secular and Islamic-oriented political identities and lifestyles. This protest shows the openness of the Islamic identities to secularly-oriented nonreligious/non-Islamic identities in practicing Islamic rituals. In this respect, the meaning attributed to the Earth Table iftars was significantly different to the conventional meaning attributed to it, as held by the AKP municipalities during the past decade. The municipalities organise public iftars as a cultural ritual for Muslims only. Therefore, they often limit the participants of iftar meals only to those who live in accordance to Islamic cultural norms. Indeed, in the hands of the AKP municipalities, the public organisation of iftar appears as a technique to mark the essentially Islamic identity of the Turkish nation.

The Earth Tables protests were actually in tension with the conventional meaning of iftars and Islamic neo-liberalism of the AKP in general. I would like to trace this point by discussing a small incident occurred in another Earth Tables protests organised in the Taksim Square, where the Gezi Park was located. During the iftar time, a young man participated to the protest while drinking a bottle of beer. He sat there for only a minute before an old lady warned him that the beer he was drinking in iftar dinner might be exploited by the AKP-tended conservative media as a source of provocation. Considering that the protest was watched by heavy police control in intense atmosphere of the Gezi Protests, this warning was a fair one, which the young man approved and left the protest with apologies.

I find this incident important, for it reveals a contest towards Islamic moralism of the AKP that regenerate the secular/Islamic divide in urban Turkish public life. In conventional iftar meals of the AKP municipalities, the presence of an alcohol consuming participant would be unthinkable, for this behaviour would be perceived by the extreme majority as an assault to their religious norms. Whereas the main tendency of Earth Tables participants in warning the young man was not the feeling of being desecrated, but rather a suspicion to be politically exploited by the AKP circles. Indeed, the contestation of this incident by the AKP elites and AKP-tended conservative media reveals how fair this suspicion was. The AKP circles actually regenerated the secular/Islamic divide by condemning such a mixture of nonreligious and religious practices in the Earth Tables protests. The conservative media presented this incident in a way as if all the 30 thousand Earth Tables participants broke their fast with beer. Thus, far from recognising the Islam-sensitive motive of the Earth Tables, the conservative media defined these protests as an attempt to desecrate the Islamic values of the Turkish nation.

The AKP’s complicity in regenerating the secular/Islamic divide may also be traced in its identification of the Gezi protests in general. The Government defined the Gezi protests as terrorising interventions of a group of pro-coup mindset—ideologically biased marauders with no respect for democracy, morality, or society. As such, Prime Minister Erdogan responded protestors with disproportionate and excessive use of police force, and eight citizens lost their lives. Furthermore, during the second week of the Gezi protests, the AKP organized ‘Respect to National Will’ rallies in metropolitan cities, where Prime Minister Erdogan accused protestors of desecrating mosques by entering with their shoes on and consuming alcohol within them. Asserting that protestors physically attacked women veiled with Islamic headscarves in the streets, forcefully removing their scarves, he condemned the protestors as immoral beings with no respect for collective norms or national values.
Although the recent CCTV records and other evidences dismiss these accusations, Erdogan keeps defining the Gezi protestors as vandals, antidemocratic marauders, addicts and boozers, who have no respect for democracy or society, and who should learn to live in accordance with the moral norms of the majority.

### 3.2. The Earth Tables and the transformation of hegemonic secularist imaginary

Whilst abovementioned discussion on Maltepe and Taksim Square Earth Tables reveal the openness of the Islamic identities to secularly-oriented nonreligious/non-Islamic identities, I take the Yedikule Earth Table protests as a significant case to study the openness that dawned within the secularist imaginary to Islamic identities, lifestyles, and practices. The Yedikule Earth Table protest was carried by totally non-religious left-wing people against the AKP Istanbul Municipality’s act of destroying a 14 hundred years old historical garden in the region, and, in its place, building a park as a backyard for newly built residences. Approximately, 60 left-wing protesters organised Earth Table protest in order to create a collective consciousness in the neighbourhood that might save the historical and natural fabric of the region. Yet, as one of the organisers of the protests told me, for a group of politically motivated people, who speak through the language of the secular left, to organise such an Islamically-motivated ritual also meant something:

‘This protest means that I [as a secularly-oriented agent] do not ‘Otherise’ you. I respect your religion, prayer, and rituals. I share your rituals with you. We can have your rituals together, and transform it into a collective act... This is not toleration. I would, rather, like to say that I accept them for who they are. Our protest reveals that secularly- and Islamic-oriented people would accept each other for who they are and can still act together. It reveals that the wall between “us” and “them” is cracking.’

This secularist openness to interact with Islamic communities to create alliance and political mobilisation is a key resource to trace the transformation within the dominant secularist imaginary in Turkey. The hegemonic secularist imaginary regenerated the secular/Islamic divide through the denial and demonization of the Islamic subjects. Consider, for example, the following TV commercial which was made by a secularist newspaper in 2007. The commercial contests the replacement of ‘modern’ and ‘secular’ Republican woman with ‘Islamic’ and ‘traditional’ veiled woman as a threat against the modern and secular foundations of the Republic regime. It also asserts that the uncanny male, who dubs the voice of the veiled woman and who symbolises the Islamic political elite in the commercial, controls her entire affairs, from the way that she dresses to what she is supposed to say. The veiled woman, who symbolises and visualises Islamic subjectivity in urban Turkish public life, is identified as a victim of Islamic socio-political actors, and who must be liberated through the paternalistic interventions of the secular state, including the interventions of the army and judiciary. Indeed, the secularist feelings of fear of and being harassed by the presence of the Islamic subject was so intense that, nearly for three decades partial suspension of democratic life was mainly perceived acceptable and even necessary insofar as the interventions of the army and judiciary liberate the urban public and political life from Islamic socio-political identities and lifestyles.

Whereas the secularist discourses in the post-Gezi Park context of Turkey was far from denying and demonizing the subjectivities of Islamic communities. On the contrary, the secularist willingness to recognise and politically act together with Islamic communities reveal the ceasing of secularist fear of, paranoia or harassment from the presence of Islamic socio-political identities and lifestyles. As such, I take the Yedikule Earth Tables protests as a significant case to trace the transformation of the hegemonic secularist imaginary which has
been grounded upon securitising the urban Turkish public life from Islamic subjectivities and concealing Islamic visibilities.

4. Conclusion: towards a recognition politics

To sum up, the replication of the Earth Tables protests, as well as the resulting openness that dawned upon both secular and Islamic imaginaries, reveal the constitutive impact of the Gezi Park protests on opening the urban Turkish public life to the production of recognition politics between historically contending secular and Islamic socio-political identities. In this respect, I locate the radicalism of the Gezi protests not in its ‘anti’-AKP tendency, but in its invocation of a contest and transformation on the hegemonic secular/Islamic divide through producing recognition politics between these identities. Thus, the way in which the Gezi protestors contested the AKP Government cannot be reduced into a will to overthrow the Government, because this contestation also produces recognition politics, which have potential impact on transforming the hegemonic rule of secular/Islamic divide in configuring the coordinates of doing politics in the post-1990 context of Turkey. The final words of this presentation are taken from my interview I conducted with the formal Chair of the Anti-Capitalist Muslims, which illustrates the significance of producing recognition politics for the Gezi protestors in defining the meaning of the Gezi protests:

‘The Gezi spirit cannot be explained with a collective will to overthrow the Government and by replacing it with another government. It is about border transgression. Muslims exceeded their limits and took part in secular spaces. Secularists did the same and appeared in Muslim spaces. And people enjoyed this transgression a lot! They got to know one other. Secularists realised that their imagination of Muslim as s/he who slaughters people in the name of God is untrue. Muslims realised that their imagination of secular as apolitical partying guy is wrong. The spirit of the Gezi is nothing but the collective enjoyment people had in knowing one other. Those who were marked as terrorists before turned into brothers. In Gezi Park, we were all Muslim, atheist, LGBT, socialist, communist, nationalist, and Kemalist at the same time. And we got on very well...’

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.