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## **Informal Learning in 2013 Gezi Protests in Turkey**

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**Everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance**

### **Abstract**

Gezi Park is located in Taksim, a popular area in Istanbul, Turkey. When the Turkish Government (Justice and Development Party) declared their new urban development plan for the park in 2013, it triggered environmentalist to occupy the park. Later, many people joined them in the Park. For more than two weeks (28-May-June 15), the activists and participants who actively occupied Gezi Park showed what values, as well as what kind of social and environmental relations, they demanded. Their peaceful occupation became a “learning from each other” realm, where genuine (natural) organization emerged.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how informal learning emerged in Gezi Park Protests particularly during the first two weeks in the Park. The paper concludes that critical informal learning in social action has taken place during the Gezi Protests in the Park.

**Keywords:** *Gezi Park Protests, informal learning, learning in social action, Critical Pedagogy.*

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## Introduction

Gezi Protests in Turkey can be analyzed from various political, sociological, economical, psychological and educational perspectives. When a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest emerged in 79 cities in Turkey in 2013, social scientists gave all their attention to them. It resulted in an inflation of academic, semi academic articles, as well as publication of many books. One of the confusions of these works was related to what to call these “events”. Some of the labels were as follows: *Gezi Revolt*, *Gezi Park Events*, *Gezi Park Protests*, *Gezi Park Actions*, *Revolt in Dignity*, *Resistance*, *Taksim Resistance*, *June Revolt*, *June Resistance*. We can conclude that variety of these labels show the very variety of Gezi Park Protests and their unique multidimensional nature.

Social movements such as workers movements and woman movements are intended for the whole class. New social movements, on the other hand, emerge among particular groups, areas, or part of class, but they are the blossoms of broader social movements. Gezi Protests can be regarded as a new social movement but it belongs to the parts of classes. Boratav (2013) warns us in calling Gezi Protests a “middle class movement” in that they are *beyond* the middle class movement. He strongly argues that the Protests in Turkey have a class dimension as football fans from all clubs were involved, they also have a working class dimension as those high school and university students were aware of the fact that they would end up in the capitalist/ neoliberal circles of unemployment or in low-wage salaries.

In this regard, Boratav calls these protests a “revolt against hegemonic neoliberal politics of urbanization” (Boratav, 2013:1-2). Allied with professionals and marginals, the participants were both today’s workers with higher education degrees and tomorrow’s workers. According to Boratav, the main slogan of Gezi Protests “Everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance” simply shows a democratic discourse of a *developed class without borders* (2013:2).

In this paper, Gezi Protests are analyzed in regard to i) social and political context that they emerged, ii) informal learning in social action, iii) its social outcomes and iv) challenges for Critical Pedagogy.

### I. Social and Political Context

What started as an environmental protest to save 600 trees in Gezi Park, Istanbul, quickly turned into a nationwide political demonstration against Erdoğan and his government in 2013. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister and the head of Justice and Political Party in Turkey, has been recognized as the most popular politician in Turkey after winning five consecutive elections by increasing his majority each time:

- 34,28 % in 2002
- 46,58 % in 2007
- 49,83 % in 2011

- 40,87 % in June 2015<sup>2</sup>
- 49,50 % in November 2015

On top of the iceberg, his success and popularity is interlinked with Turkey's economic development. Turkey's per capita income was tripled within a decade under Erdoğan's leadership. Along with the growing economy, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) regime has been dealing effectively with the coup leaders of Turkey's recent past. A large number of generals were accused of conspiring against his government and arrested. He also has taken significant steps to calm down the violent conflict with the Kurdish minority. Erdoğan projected an image of an invincible leader controlling power in his hands.

But below the iceberg, over the years, many women have been murdered by their husbands or ex-husbands despite divorce, and despite police protection. Young girls have been forced to leave school and to get married with older men. Over the years, thousands of workers gave their lives under abusive subcontracting, where they were working for minimal wages, without proper insurance. Over the years, forests have been felled and urbanized and sold as properties. The heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a farmland in Ankara that belongs to the Turkish Republic, was made public good, first, then partially cleared to build a Presidential Palace for Erdoğan. Over the years, taxes were raised, wages lowered, prices increased, gas/ natural gas/ electricity prices went up incredibly. The education system has been altered not for the better but for the worse. Now, national education system is under serious attack of neoliberal policies and teoliberal policies. Most public schools are transformed into religious schools.

Erdoğan came to office to set democracy for the better and for providing more social justice, but other than significant social issues shortly put above, there were political issues such as:

- The electoral 10% threshold was designed to prevent proper representation of Kurdish and other groups' in Ankara (ntv).
- The restriction of freedom of speech in Turkey has been illustrated with the tight control of the media (bianet).
- Apart from continuous austerity politics, the AKP has adopted an increasingly authoritarian attitude that threatens to control basic freedoms of Turkey. We have witnessed such measures like restriction of selling alcohol and criticism of couples kissing in the metro (cnntürk and hürriyet).
- Erdoğan has increasingly dictating and polarizing voice on different matters such as abortion rules, alcohol ban, refusal to grant place of worship status to Cemevi-Alewites's place of worship (evrensel).

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<sup>2</sup> Author's Note: when Gezi protests emerged, Justice and Development Party had succeeded in general elections three times in a row. They repeated the same success in two elections in 2015.

- He and his circle manipulated citizens with his false discourse on religion. He declared an obvious hostility to the university students, mixed gender, sharing the same flat (radikal and hürriyet).
- And, finally, neoliberal politics attack the intellectual sphere more than economic sphere in Turkey. Islamisation allied with neoliberalism results in loss of class consciousness, loss of academic freedom, and loss of free education in Turkey (birgün).

Obviously, Gezi Protests did not emerge over one day. There were social and political issues built up over the eleven years of their ruling.

## II. Informal learning/ Learning in Social Action

It can be said that in regard to critical learning and emancipatory learning, Gezi Protests were the learning realms for both participants and followers. As long as it is gathered from their interviews, informal learning was fostered at the socialization level and spiritual level among some participants.

As we know, learning takes place not only in cognitive level but also in spiritual, social, emotional, physical, and affective levels. It is worth noting that there is no one single definition of informal learning, but it embraces everyday experience. According to Schugurensky (2000), informal learning takes three forms; *self-directed learning* (intentional and conscious), *incidental learning* (unintentional but conscious), and *socialization* (unconscious/ unaware) (2000:4). It is the third form of informal learning that one can recognize his prejudices and biases that were the product of primary socialization.

According to English (2000), there are three spiritual dimensions of adult learning and informal learning.

*a. Strong sense of self:* It is to build a relationship with other people, to support each other, to trust each other. It also brings about recognition of their deepest longings, desires and needs.

*b. Care, concern, and outreach to others:* It is related to protection of others who need it. It comes when one realizes there is beyond his consciousness that everyone is unique, and therefore, should be protected. “Human life is enhanced when adults acknowledges the possibility of drawing strength from others, learning from them, and appreciating their presence as life-giving and affirming” (English, 2000: 30).

*c. The continuous construction of meaning and knowledge:* Learning is lifetime, and the search for meaning is learning. It also requires a realization of our future lives that are strongly bound up with that of other people. Being part of something that is beyond ourselves is profoundly spiritual, according to English.

But how do these dimensions came about? What are the strategies to foster spiritual development? English (2000) holds that one strategy is *mentoring* that occurs between two adults; one is more experienced and the other is less experienced. Another strategy is *self-directed learning* that fosters self-development in the individual. As many of us observe, adults do not necessarily learn alone but rather they learn collaboratively. The third strategy is *engaging in dialogue* that covers interpersonal connections and interchanges among people that encourage and promote spiritual learning (English, 2000: 30-31).

In this context, interviews with the Gezi Park activists and protesters show that they fostered a strong sense of self, care and concern, and continuous construction of meaning. Following analysis depends on various interviews given by the activists and participants in Gezi Park Protests especially during the first two weeks in the park.

Caring for one another as one of the strategies of spiritual learning can be seen in the following statements of one of the participants in the Park, Zeynep Firat, (qtd. in Inal, 2013). She states that everyone was friendly and kind to each other; they were sharing the donated food, tidying the mess, talking and sharing their experience. According to her, it was something unexpected, it felt like a great accomplishment to live and share peacefully. It was also extremely emotional, magical and hopeful to see the collective work done (qtd. in Inal, 2013: 15). In this regard, Inal also emphasizes that Gezi Park protests were the realms of informal learning and dialogical learning (2013:16).

Another activist in Gezi Park, Gizem Çıtak (2013) says that resistance became a daily habit. The banners were not imposed but rather agreed upon by the demonstrators themselves. Each participant was individually accepted as a unit, which was not a lower than an organization. Five demonstrators would make a unit for their voice, for instance. Each unit became a decision maker (2013: 116).

Gezi Protests triggered what we like to call “Gezi Spirit”. After they were banned from occupying the Gezi Park, activists initiated further meetings. They defined themselves as knowledgeable, active citizens who willingly participated in the protests. Willingness and conscious participation continued later as well. One of the outcomes of these protests were *Neighborhood Forums*, which were held in different green parks in Istanbul, Ankara, Eskişehir, Izmir, and many other cities to continue the solidarity and dialogue. The struggle against police intervention, or rather police attacks, created hardship and solidarity among them, which shows a continuous construction of meaning and knowledge.

Neighborhood Forums can be considered as horizontal organizations, which are autonomous, rather than vertical organizations, which are authoritative, as we know it. This is another feature for informal learning as they continued to stick to each other, care and look for better solutions. They express a transition, change and solidarity as their experience. This is also where they were pursuing meaning in their actions. Informal learning at the socialization level and spiritual level can be observed in activists and participants’ dialogues and meaning construction.

Gezi Park turned out to be a safe zone for the participants and activist. Değirmencioğlu (2013) quotes from one of the activists, Deniz Özgür, that in the park, life was exhausting as they had to be alert all the times, as well as they were amazed with the creativity, collaboration and caring among the participants. He expresses a genuine enjoyment of being part of something like this in his lifetime, which was cathartic and intoxicating, as described by Özgür (qtd in. Değirmencioğlu, 2013:199).

Zileli’s evaluation of Gezi Park organizational style is worth noting (2013: 64). According to him division of jobs, sharing and spiritual involvement of activists were based on both pure volunteering and self-initiative. Regarding community consciousness, it can be said that it aroused naturally without

instruction. He also thinks that Neighborhood Forums had the same spiritual involvement. Participants worked with their collective mind (2013: 65).

Arat-Koç talks about three features of these protests: youth, sharing and inclusiveness. Widespread *involvement of youth* in the protests is one of them. Most grownups assumed that the generation that grew up during the 1980s and 90s were apolitical, but the protests have proven this assumption wrong. Youth have participated in the protests in large numbers. “They have shown passion, courage, energy, creativity, ingenuity, and humor” (Arat-Koç, 2013:1). As for *sharing*, which is rather related to the aspect of informal learning, protests have been of a rich culture of sharing. During more than two weeks of protests, the camp in Gezi Park has become a “commune”, according to Arat-Koç and many others. Culture of sharing involved free food, medicine, books, music, plays, concerts, films, and even yoga lessons. Doctors and lawyers offered free services and made contacts widely available.

During police attacks, residents of the apartment buildings, and luxury hotels around the area opened their doors to the protestors. This can be called the sense of collectivity as we know it. The collective responsibility was beyond concern for the environment. Arat-Koç quotes from one of the woman protesters that they had never felt so safe in their lives, of course, in the cases when there were no police attacks (2013: 2). In the Park everyone looked after each other’s safety, which indicates mentoring and caring for one another. Last feature was *inclusiveness*. Political solidarity was established in Gezi Park. Environmentalists, secular Turkish nationalists, socialists, anarchists, feminists, Kurds, Muslims, LGBTQ activists and many more built such solidarity that broke the separatist political discourse of Turkish government.

In Gezi Protests, the most visible population was the young people. They care a lot about their individuality and distinctiveness. They mostly rejected the common political discourse that holds “all for one” or “we are the same”. Many were thinking that these young people were only interested in their PC games or chatting online. Their commitment to the internet, however, turned out to be their weapons against police attacks. There was an amazing coordination via Twitter and Facebook. They created their own global village in the Gezi Park as well.

That learning becomes part of a movement’s work, whether deliberately or incidentally is understandable. Learning in social movement can be acquired informally when protestors are directly engaged in protesting e.g. logging in Clayoquot Sound in British Columbia, Canada (Foley, 1999). It can also be acquired directly e.g. when they are trained to monitor elections in South Africa (Foley, 1999). Learning in social movement can also occur incidentally and also more deliberately when engaged in mass protests e. g. in Tunisia in 2011. In the Arab world, they learned the power of collective action and resistance to corrupt regimes. However, English and Mayo are cautious to state that people involved constitute a social movement. They think it is a complicated issue, as these movements differ according to contexts. Western models of social movements and their language are different from non-western contexts. In other words, we should not define movements according to set templates or models (English and Mayo, 2014: 4).

English and Mayo (2014) analyze some slogans of protestors from various countries such as Egypt, Greece, Vienna, Budapest, England, and Italy. The protests, for instance, in Egypt, was a protest of outburst according to one of the protestors. In January 2011, in Egypt, the whole country said “That is Enough!” In Greece, protests were more of saying “No to Capitalism”. Activists say that it was a movement for political change as well as global consciousness. English and Mayo quote from Greek activists that “learning comes in better way when you experience things.” (2014: 6). In Turkey, there was one big slogan: “Government, step down!” which demands political change.

In some parts of Europe, several protests emerged, including student uprising in connection with university cuts, but mostly they were related to neoliberal reforms; in other words, issues related to capitalism and neoliberalism were at the heart of the protest movements in Europe. According to English and Mayo (2014), Gramscian question “whether these protests are of spontaneous action without conscious direction” remains a pertinent one (2014: 8) and “what complicates the issue of what constitutes a social movement is that movements differ according to context” (2014: 9).

Despite various contexts, whether learning takes place in these movements is without a question. One way or another, informally or accidentally it does take place. Western social movements, old and new ones, show certain progress, process, organizations, outcomes, etc. They can be the reactions to neoliberalism and hegemonic globalization. Resistance and protests have been common in many parts of the world. However, in regard to political learning leading to critical learning, if political awareness, political learning, political consciousness, political participation are parts of critical learning, I think, we can conclude that social movements and protests movements are learning sites, where “the personal is political” has really found its place. Learning is political, teaching is political, protesting is political, I go further saying that even tweeting is political.

As English and Mayo point out social movements are themselves learning sites. One learns through mobilization, awareness raising activities, organizing a campaign, teach-ins, marches, sit-ins or sit-outs, poster sessions (banners), etc. One also learns through participation in a strike- the meaning of solidarity, issues of industrial relations, negotiation strategies, and so forth. Other than these, the transition from “learning” to “unlearning” is also essential as is also emphasized by Foley (1999). As is known this kind of transition or transformation is central in critical pedagogy.

Although it might be early to call it a social movement, if we take political awareness and knowledge as learning, we can say that in Gezi Protests learning took place. Similar to English and Mayo’s case from Egypt, some Gezi Park protestors said their views of other people have changed. Fans of three opposing football teams were united, leftists and rightists were united, gays and straights were united. Unity and solidarity in the protests were described as cathartic, joyful, and success.

A lot has been written, analyzed, evaluated from various perspectives about Gezi park protests in Turkey. Their one common point is that in these protests, regardless of their revolutionary characteristics, people from various groups, levels, realms, identities, ideologies, city districts were genuinely

involved. More importantly, they were aware of such a community consciousness, which was leading to informal learning and critical learning.

### **III. Some of the outcomes of the 2013 Gezi Protests:**

**Environment:** One of the challenges of these events is to stimulate much serious discussion about the right use of urban commons, how public investments are allocated, the distinction between urban commons and public goods.

**Participation:** Now, citizens are more politically involved. There is an obvious political discourse in the social media. Environmental issues and neoliberal urbanization protests are one of the extensions of these events.

**Dissent:** The role of women cannot be ignored in the protests. The hegemonic and patriarchal attitude of Erdoğan and what he represents is criticized by Turkish feminist groups. There is also an attempt by feminists and LGBTQ activists to reinvent the “language of resistance”. Still, graffiti and slogans from the protestors deploy a sexist and masculine language, though.

**Mainstream media:** The failure of the mass media was obvious during the protests. There was a kind of distrust of the media before anyway, but it became clearer to the citizens. Now social media take almost all the attention. Despite all the censorship in the mainstream media in Turkey, demonstrators succeeded in their purpose.

**Corruption and what follows it:** Since December 2013, there have been corruption scandals, recordings of genuine phone conversations by members of the government planning what to do with the money, how to get money, how to distribute the properties, how to legalize their illegal acts.

**Gendered protests:** Protests in Turkey become places for strong male activists rather than women. Police attacks, tear gas and water cannon increase frustration among women. There are many women who are willing to join these protests, but the events they would face make them reluctant to join.

**Non-organized organizations:** Protests do not belong to single class, age, gender, ethnicity, etc. Demonstrators were organized without a leader around. Protests were peaceful. Conflicts were meant to be resolved peacefully. Organization emerged naturally.

**Sense of fear:** Apathy, which means a lack of interest or concern, was overcome in these demonstrations, protests. Through their passions for justice and the euphoria of solidarity, Turkish people also seem to have lost their sense of fear (Arat-Koç, 2013: 1).

**Personal is political.** Political involvement and democracy is now more than voting for a political party during elections. Famous feminist discourse is now part of social revolts in Turkey.

**Revolt against individualization:** In Giroux’s (2011) term, Gezi protests can be considered as revolt against individualization. He puts forward that the society has been individualized in that “all problems are now shifted onto the shoulders of individuals, who have to bear the full burden of solving them (2011: 55). Shifting responsibilities from public to individuals was disturbing for Turkish people.

#### IV. Conclusion: Challenges for Critical Pedagogy

If we define critical pedagogy as an ongoing project instead of a method of instruction, it involves “performative nature of agency as an act of participating in shaping the world in which we live” (Giroux, 2013:2). In this context, recent revolts, social movements, in the global level, can be considered as attempts of participating in shaping the world.

Social movements appeal to Critical Pedagogues because they are engaged in adult education and learning in social actions. Their focus is on education on social justice, particularly on the informal and non-formal learning that occurs in social movements (Foley, qtd. in English and Mayo, 2013: 9). Regarding this feature of learning, the collective dimension of knowledge, the kind of knowledge sharing resulting from and contributing to the type of social solidarity, and bonding are fostered in social movements (p. 9). This aspect can be observed in western-based environmental movements, but the challenge is that organizations and movements increase and vary in size and context.

Freire, father of critical pedagogy, gave great prominence to progressive social movements in his work. He constantly exhorted educators to work not in isolation but in the context of social movements or an alliance of social movements (qtd. in Mayo, 2012; 27).

In conclusion, participants who actively occupied Gezi Park showed what values were demanded as well as what kind of social and environmental relations were demanded. They were critically involved in learning from each other as well. Even one of the slogans of the protests is worth considering it from critical perspective: “**Nothing will ever be the same again!**” These protests are the extension of what is called “social transformation”. GEZI Protests are blossoms of a revolution as a global alternative; however, they are certainly open to more analysis.

While Hill (2013) and Scordoulis (2013) offer solution in Marxism and workers class revolution, one of the future remarks of 2013 Gezi Park Protests is smartly put by Mayo (2013: 350) that we are going through a new era where there is international revolt against neoliberalism and unequal distribution of resources. The new mission, according to Mayo, is to form an internationally united structure, or party, or alliance that fights in favor of 99% of the world to live in dignity and social stability, which fights against capitalist attack, commodification, and neoliberal politics (p.350).

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