

Smells like Gezi spirit

Democratic sensibilities and carnivalesque politics in Turkey

Meyda Yeğenoğlu

A small protest in Istanbul, which began by aiming to protect the urban greenery, was rapidly turned into a full-blown nationwide resistance. The protests should be regarded as the most important outcry of the Turkish people since the 1980 coup, and herald a new period in the history of Turkey. But it would be a mistake to try to understand their defining features simply with reference to the so-called Arab Spring.

It appeared that the prime minister's authoritarian manner of governing the country and making decisions on matters that have an immediate effect on people's everyday lives, bodies and spaces was the immediate object of the discontent. Many critics, journalists and social scientists have argued that people protested primarily against the condescending, disdainful and haughty manner with which the prime minister took decisions and executed them. It is true that in recent years Erdoğan has developed a patronizing style of governance and intensified moralistic and religious discourse on matters such as smoking, the number of children families should have, abortion (he wanted to curtail its accessibility), the inappropriateness of giving birth by Caesarean section, and alcohol consumption (he called people who consume any amount of alcohol *ayyaş* – drunkards). However, placing the emphasis on the prime minister's authoritarian manner fails to explain the dynamics of the burgeoning political energy and the aspiration to open up a new political space created by the protests.

One of the factors that enabled an Islamic party to come to power in Turkey was the challenge it posed to the exclusionary and elitist understanding of citizenship fostered by the Kemalist Republican project, which was in contradiction with the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of the country. In the last two decades, Islamists have fought for the recognition and democratic inclusion of their sensibilities, ways of life and cultural expression in the public domain. During its ten years of governance, the government has not only taken measures to reorganize the public domain according to the neoliberal policies it has aggressively followed, but has also recast its status from that of 'victim' to that of 'omnipotent sovereign'. Eagerly occupying such a position, it has escalated its regulation of various institutions on the basis of a religiously inspired discursive configuration and promulgated



Come on, sweetie! Let's go to the park!



measures that have immediate effect on people's bodies, activities, customs and habits. This attempt to reorganize the private domain in keeping with a religiously driven model can be understood in terms of Foucault's notion of biopower. The attempt to reinscribe the bodies and minds of citizens, accompanied by an Islamic moralism, is an attempt to reorganize the capillaries of the private space of citizens by creating individuals who have desires, bodies, pleasures and pains that are deemed appropriate by the government's religiously guided ideology. The new biopower that the government wished to install needs to be seen as an attempt to regulate social and private life from its interior, following,

interpreting, absorbing and rearticulating it as a field of Islamic immanence. The protestors' urge to say 'no' to this biological, somatic and corporeal inscription, along with the unyielding authoritarianism of the prime minister, were the precursors of the civil unrest. Accompanied by police violence and in the face of the government's headstrong attitude, the protestors have begun to address a wide variety of other issues, all of which have ended up contesting the government's continued power over the country.

The spirit – the catchphrase 'Gezi spirit' is widely used in Turkish social media – that was developed during the protests attests to the fact that Turkish youth is now challenging the many efforts to unify, homogenize and reinscribe their bodies through this religiously inspired biopower. The government's nostalgia for the Ottoman past has displayed itself in its approach to both foreign affairs and the construction and use of hackneyed and kitsch replicas of Ottoman cultural artefacts, customs and practices in various city spaces and during national celebrations and events. It is also possible to identify another form of nostalgic yearning. This pertains to the prime minister's desire to construct himself by surreptitiously mimicking the Kemalist project's authoritarian and top-down micromanagement of the social order. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk occupies the position of an authoritarian father figure, as his name attests: *the father-Turk*. However, Erdoğan's desire to mimic the most powerful and perhaps the most charismatic political leader in the country's history is seriously misjudged, as the sensibilities of the new digital generation are very different from those of their parents and grandparents, who submitted to the Kemalist project's standardization and homogenization. Their sense of reality is shaped by and connected to cyberspace, and their subjectivity is now informed by a strong sense of instantaneity and autonomy, as well as ideas of tolerance and freedom. Sensitivity to such values and codes produces an indifference to sovereignty and power, shaped by a kind of spontaneous pluralism.

The prime minister in one of his speeches referred to the demonstrators as *çapulcu*. The term means literally 'looters' but a better translation is 'rabble', referring as it does to a clamorous group of people who are regarded with contempt. A whole vocabulary around *çapulcu* was subsequently appropriated by the protestors, who joyfully embraced the label, spreading it on social media and thereby turning a local protest into an event characterized by irony, satire, parody and the grotesque. A robust sense of humour has accompanied the placards, slogans and songs, turning the protests into a carnivalesque event. Protests have displayed the characteristics of a *ritualized rebellion* of the kind that Mikhail Bakhtin describes in *Rabelais and His World*. For Bakhtin, in this process not only is the world turned upside down, but things are infused with new meanings. Through creative theatrical expressions, life experiences are overturned, transformed and subverted in a joyful manner by those whose voices and energies have hitherto been suppressed. In this new condition, the hierarchies of the familiar

world are overturned. Carnival brings a different sense of a world where uninhibited communication between diverse groups and free interaction and expression are fortified. As the hierarchies of everyday life are subverted, the prudent becomes the fool, the sovereign becomes the vagrant, and so on. Opposites are intermixed, social etiquettes are invalidated and pieties are profaned. As the voice of authority is profaned, it is also voided; alternative and suppressed voices gain a new legitimacy and authority. Bakhtin finds in carnival a site of resistance to authority and sees it as the site where political change can take place. Indeed, what has transpired in the demonstrations is the joyful subversion of Erdoğan's authority. The protestors have created a utopian atmosphere of egalitarian community, autonomy and liberation through which they have challenged the existing forms of hierarchy. In such a community, where participants are positioned as equals, the prevalent social positions, norms, habits, ideas and ritualized practices are challenged and different ones installed, as the community as a whole acts against structures of hierarchy.

By protesting against the prime minister's authoritarian and patronizing style of governance, the protestors have expressed their desire for an *expansion of democratic sensibilities* by developing an amazing spirit in the park. In this way they have set out to cultivate a new sensibility and means of conducting social relations among people who do not necessarily share the same identity, political leaning, or educational, religious or class background. Thus myriad political views, positions, slogans, lifestyles and identities have acted in solidarity and engaged for days in a form of coexistence that the Turkish public sphere had not previously witnessed. To give just one example: in response to the accusations that they are joining the 'drunkards' and the 'spoiled', a group called 'Anti-Capitalist Muslims' announced that they would rather be with the drunkards than with those who have sold out to neoliberal capitalism.

The demonstrations also defied the long-standing enmity between Islamists and secularists in Turkey. By remaining indifferent to this enmity, indeed by gesturing towards its abolition, the protestors might be heralding the birth of a new democratic political and cultural space in Turkey. The distinction Talal Asad makes, in a recent contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, between 'democratic sensibility as an ethos' and 'democracy as the political system of the state' is relevant to understanding the nature of the political spirit that developed with the protest. As Asad suggests, the former includes concern for subjective rights, desire for mutual care, the ability to listen and care for others, as well as to evaluate them without being judgmental. In short, there is a capacity to be more inclusive. The latter, however, is protective of sovereignty: purporting to protect individual rights, it inculcates a nationalist zeal and operates according to a bureaucratic rationality; it is thus basically exclusive. These two modes are not incompatible; the question is whether the latter undermines the former and, if so, to what extent.

Such a distinction can be deployed to understand the political and cultural context that has flourished with the protests in Turkey. The specific culture and spirit that materialized in the protests attest to the emergence of, or perhaps the desire for, the advent of a democratic sensibility whereby people with different lifestyles, political leanings, religious inclinations and identities are able to express mutual care and listen to each other, thus seeking inclusivity rather than following the oppositional politics instituted by the secularists and Islamists over the last ninety years or so. By remaining indifferent to democracy as a political system that is instituted in a top-down fashion, they are now accomplishing a carnivalesque displacement of existing enmities. But, as Asad's analysis reminds us, it will become clear in the coming period whether the democratic sensibility that flourished in the park will have the power to permeate and determine the state's politics or whether the state's sovereign politics of democracy will undermine the democratic sensibility that has emerged through the protests.