OCCUPY GEZI PARKI: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

SEMINAR, 18-JUNE-2013, UNIVERSITY OF KENT

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We need to show complete solidarity with those who are standing up for values we share, with those young women in the photos whom we instinctively recognise as us.

Timothy Garton Ash

A lucky coincidence made the event ‘Occupy Gezi Parki: Eyewitness Accounts’ possible: the return to Canterbury of Adem¹, student of Sociology, after two weeks of protests in Istanbul. Adem kindly agreed to give a personal account of his experience as a protester in Gezi Parki.

The Istanbul protests began when a group of not more than 50 individuals started living in Gezi Parki at the end of May. The park, one of the few remaining green areas in Istanbul, risked being demolished and substituted by yet another shopping centre. In order to defend their city and, with it, their right of expression in a country where basic rights are more and more put at stake, students, football supporters and many more average citizens decided to take action. Their protest soon achieved great visibility and encouraged more and more supporters to join, especially after the first police attempts to clear the park, after the government authorized violence as a mean for repression.

The evening of Occupy Gezi Parki went through several stages. My opening words emphasized how the Turkish protests raised fundamental questions on crucial political issues, such as freedom of expression, power discourses, individual participation, the role of the media and the essence of democracy. Subsequently, a short documentary, summarizing the reasons of the protest and showing the events of the first week of June, was screened.

The video was followed by a brief account of the events by Adem and by a Skype call from a protester in Istanbul. The speaker from Istanbul, Aslan, replied to questions from the audience and shared the latest information available about the situation in the city. He explained how this peaceful protest soon spread over several green areas of Istanbul. The movement reached great visibility throughout Turkey and beyond its

1 All names have been changed to protect the identities of the people named.

borders. It is estimated that during the first days of protest, 300 people were attracted to Istanbul. The actions in Istanbul inspired similar demonstrations in other cities such as Izmir and Ankara. When asked to describe the atmosphere of Gezi Parki, Aslan defined it as a utopia, ruled by solidarity and mutual collaboration among citizens.

Adem elaborated upon some of the issues raised during the Skype conversation. Even during the police interventions, where violence had been authorized by the government, non-violent, peaceful resistance was the most common reaction on the Occupy Gezi Parki Movement's side. Ambushes, the arrival of bulldozers in the park and the use of teargas and water against the protesters were reported. Adem told of the many people he had seen losing their sight because of teargases, and described how policemen captured people with ropes, broke windows and threw gas inside houses. He himself, he joked, had developed the ability to recognize, 'like a taster, different types of teargases'! Predictably, the support from the population rocketed after the first police actions to clear the park and to punish the protesters.

Subsequently, Adem turned his attention on the media coverage of the protest. Primarily, he underlined how the censorship and distortion of news enforced by the government was the last straw for many citizens. He gave two examples of how mainstream media tend to enforce the governmental agenda. In one case, national television maintained that upon the first clearance of Gezi Parki (on the 30th of May), the demonstrators had burnt their own tents. In another, on the 31st of May, CNN Turkey decided to broadcast a documentary on penguins instead of showing the clashes between police and protesters. In contrast, social media proved to be the most reliable and up-to-date sources of information.

According to Adem, authorities' attempts to stop the protest led to a boomerang effect. From the initial 50 individuals, the number of supporters of the Occupy Gezi Parki Movement reached 5,000 participants, many of whom, in his words, 'obviously were not familiar with street demonstrations'. The indignation caused by the media coverage of the events and the authorities' use of violence played a major role in creating such a huge consensus in the population.

When the park was cleared, nearby Taksim Square was occupied, with Prime Minister Erdogan's authorization. This space became a place of artistic expression, of encounters and seminars. Again, Adem described the atmosphere in Taksim as peaceful: for days there were neither police interventions nor violence of any form. Participants were encouraged to share their problems and the impact of the government's policies on their everyday lives. Activists focussed especially on issues such as freedom of speech, contraception, abortion and the consumption of alcohol, which have recently undergone stricter regulations.

Finally, Adem considered the impact of the protests on the supporters of the government. According to Adem, the protests showed how, despite the rules of a majoritarian political system, the presence of opposition is vital for a true democracy. Although being a minority, the protesters have gained the right to be listened to and to be respected by their fellow citizens.

The conclusion of the evening saw a Q/A session, where members of the audience, presenter and organizers had a lively exchange of ideas.

The organizers would like to express their gratitude to both Adem and Aslan, for sharing their experience with the audience at the University of Kent, as well as to the many Turkish postgraduate students for their invaluable enthusiasm and support throughout the organization process.

Occupy Gezi Parki at the University of Kent was the first event of the kind organized by INSPR; further seminars and talks are to be held in the academic year 2013/2014.

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