Violence, Resistance, and Gezi Park

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As a student of politics whose primary research interest is in women's political participation in Turkey, my engagement with the study of violence is through the lens of gender.[1] In gender studies, "violence" is arguably the most important critical concept for the articulation of the personal as the political. Women's recognition that violence in their personal lives and intimate relationships needed to be problematized in the political realm and transformed through public debate was a revolutionary development. Bringing this recognition into the canon of political thought has been a major contribution of feminist theorists.

Theoretical developments on the subject of violence have been intertwined with feminist theorizing on gender issues. In their attempts to understand structural discrimination and victimization of women, feminist theorists developed the concept of intersectionality.[2] Intersectional studies approach oppression by drawing attention to its multilayered dimension, explaining how concepts such as race, class, religion, and nationality shape and evolve with that of gender. Other feminists have emphasized the transnational processes and cross-border dynamics that shape intersectional structural inequalities, including those of gender, focusing on how colonialism, imperialism, and "forces of contemporary globalization" shape the power discrepancies that lead to subjugation, discrimination, and violence in local contexts.[3]

Feminist scholars have also insisted on the continuity of intersectionally shaped violence across different realms, emphasizing a conception of violence that goes beyond the purely physical or sexual and includes the psychological, discursive, and economic. It takes place in different contexts and places, from wartime to peacetime. Cynthia Cockburn refers to the "continuum of violence [that] runs through the social, economic, and the political, with gender relations penetrating all these forms of relations, including economic power."[4] Institutions such as the family, the military, and the state are infused with violence and "gender power relations augment the violence in class and ethnically based associations."[5]

In short, gender-based approaches to the study of violence have drawn our attention to the continuum of violence over different realms using increasingly sophisticated notions of intersectionality, showing that violence can involve much more than brute force. Applying the theoretical insights of multilayered axes of violence to the study of Middle Eastern politics can sharpen our understanding of why processes of democratization in the region have produced illiberal political forms. If, for example, respect for civil liberties is a necessary though not sufficient condition of liberal democracies, the concept of an intersectionally defined continuum of violence including but not limited to brute force draws attention to the multilayered obstructions to the exercise of these liberties. It helps us to think more clearly about these obstructions as they emerge in a continuum beyond narrow electoral politics in illiberal democracies. In contemporary Turkish politics, we can analyze the political protests that spontaneously erupted over

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the preservation of Gezi Park in Taksim Square as forms of resistance to a continuum of violence enacted by an increasingly authoritarian government. Similar to the Arab Spring in its demand for freedoms and in its extensive reliance on social media (though the protesters in Gezi did not demand regime change), Gezi exemplifies both violence and resistance.

At the most explicit level, the events at Gezi were characterized by the state's brutal (and in some cases fatal) employment of police violence against the peacefully protesting occupiers of the park. At the same time, we can conceptualize government policies infringing upon the civil liberties of secular groups as subtle forms of violence enacted in different realms along a continuum and affecting different gender, ethnic, religious, and class groups differently. The protestors in the park were mostly middle-class, well-educated, and young men and women. More than a third were students with no prior experience in protest activity.[6] Most did not have party affiliations and came to the park as ordinary citizens with different identities, inclinations, and ideologies; they included Kemalists, leftists, environmentalists, feminists, LGBT activists, Kurds, Alevis, soccer fans, professionals, and workers. What united them was that they felt their rights had been violated by the government; their solidarity in opposing this violation gave them an opportunity to bridge their differences. For example, as they helped one another in defiance of police violence, many young Turks began to realize how Kurdish rights had been violated by the state for decades, just as they felt their rights were being violated in the protests.

Subtle government violence has taken many forms across broad domains since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power for the second time in the 2007 general elections. The government has undermined the separation of powers and established its own judiciary; discouraged the teaching of evolution to create a pious generation; cracked down on the independent press, jailed journalists, and pushed others to self-censorship; threatened secular lifestyles with restrictions on access to alcohol, closure of public theaters, and theater houses; and attempted to restrict women's choices by repealing abortion rights. Urban public space was constantly encroached upon through political decisions that allowed party cronies to build fortunes. No attention was paid to the advice of city planners or architects and little public debate on these projects took place. While most of these restrictions might have been approved by the 50 percent of the population who voted for the AKP government, the other half felt their rights were violated. The majoritarian understanding of democracy on the part of government was accompanied by the violation of minorities' rights.

The continuum of domestic violence has been exacerbated by the state's endorsement of transnationally shaped neoliberal economic policies. The government's plan to build a new shopping mall and residential complex within a replica of an Ottoman military barrack on the park grounds was interpreted by protesters as fueling rampant consumerism and commercialism, supported with heavy international borrowing. Politics at the local level was thus intertwined with cross-border forces and neoliberal transnationalism. Even the pepper gas sprayed against the protestors was imported from Brazil.

Middle Eastern experiences of violence could also contribute to theoretical developments in violence because they trigger new forms of resistance. Unique humor and sharp satire became peaceful tools of resistance in the Gezi case. Creative banners and jokes drew attention to the nature of violence and the reasons for protesting. A list of songs

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exhibiting ingenious wit quickly emerged, raising awareness of the violence experienced and emphasizing the need for resistance.

This was the protest of a postmaterialist generation. It was striking because the range of protestors in coalition against the continuum of violence in the political, social, and economic realms was very wide, yet they were united in their insistence on the right to their lifestyles and their autonomy. Resistance was shaped by universal values, neither leftist nor rightist, deeply individualistic though capable of care, solidarity, and political engagement. The protestors did not want to topple the elected government nor change the political or economic system. The broad coalition had a cross-generational dimension, bringing the mothers of those occupying the park out to protest in defense of their children and the values they shared.

After Taksim was violently evacuated, the protestors began gathering in alternate public and private forums in their respective neighborhoods to deliberate on how to resist further violence, or to come up with alternate modes of resistance, such as that of the "standing man," who stood in Taksim for eight hours in silent and peaceful protest. This was a new mode of peaceful protest in its most pure form.

In a context of globalization, the solidarity with the protesters that was expressed around the world showed that cross-border influences can take various shapes in defense of rights in a particular place. The image of a woman wearing a red summer dress and being gassed at short range by the police circulated widely over the internet, and female Italian parliamentarians attending a session on abortion rights dressed in red jackets in solidarity with her. People stood still in Europe in solidarity with the "standing man" in Gezi. The message was that there can be a continuum of resistance across different groups, generations, and global publics.

Resistance to a continuum of violence can thus cultivate cosmopolitan/universal norms in defense of rights and freedoms by politicizing previously apolitical ordinary citizens and defying the simple Orientalism and Occidentalism that have been so important to many people's understanding of the region. Paradoxically, as we in the region struggle for rights that are violated under our respective authoritarian systems, we also deepen and broaden the struggle for democratization using a language that resonates all over the world.

NOTES

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[1]Ayşe Gül Altınay and Yeşim Arat, *Violence against Women in Turkey* (Istanbul: Punto Press, 2009).

[2]Sumi Cho, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 (2013): 785–810.

[3]Vrushali Patil, "From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We've Really Come," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 (2013): 848–67.

[4]Cynthia Cockburn, "The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace," in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* ed. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 43.

[5]Ibid., 44.

[6]Konda, *Gezi Parkı Araştırması*, 6–7 June 2013, Istanbul.

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