EMERGENCY IN PROTEST: YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICS IN THE GEZI
PROTESTS

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HOW TO CITE

Emergency in Protest: Young People's Politics in the Gezi Protests

_Abstract

Protests often indicate social states of emergency. Protesters no longer agree with the existing situation and the way their lives are regulated; therefore, they demand immediate change. The Gezi protests, in which people from various social, political, and class backgrounds went to the streets to voice their dissent, certainly reflected a state of emergency in Turkey. Young people, often referred to as members of the country's post-1980 apolitical generation within public discourse, unexpectedly gathered on the streets and acted as the frontrunners of this mass movement. What is more, their way of protesting through creative performances and humor effectively increased their visibility. Drawing upon the concept of emergency, and guided by a cultural performative approach, this article focuses on young people's experiences of protest. It is a study of the reasons and meanings behind young people's participation in the protests, as well as of values such as trust, solidarity, and collectivity upon which their action was grounded. My findings are based on qualitative field research, i. e., in-depth interviews conducted with young participants of the Gezi protests in İstanbul. The investigation is driven by the questions of how young people describe the notion of the political in relation to trust, solidarity, and collectivity, and how these diverse ways of describing the political through practices foreshadow a new understanding of the political, which gained momentum from the state of emergency of the Gezi protests.

1_Youth in the Gezi Protests

The Gezi protests, which took place from May–June 2013 in Turkey, started peacefully with the occupation of Gezi Park in Taksim by ecological activists aiming to prevent the cutting down of the park's trees for the construction of a shopping mall and an artillery barrack.[1] The protests then spilled over into many parts of the country in a short span of time, with the concerns of the protesters broadening to include policies and discourses on issues such as women's rights, family, education, and city gentrification. Quantitative data collected in Gezi Park shows that the average age of participants was 28, with 57.6 percent of all participants being between 17–30 years old.[2] Youth participation reached significant levels in İstanbul and other cities.

The protests in general, and the predominant participation of young people in particular, have been perceived as unprecedented and extraordinary. This perception is worth questioning, as it reflects a preconception that contemporary youth in Turkey are uninterested and even politically incapable. Nonetheless, these protests were unprecedented in the history of mass movements in Turkey for several reasons. First of all, in terms of its scale and number of participants, it is considered to be the largest protest movement in the history of the country, with at least 2.5 million protestors on the

streets, not only of İstanbul, but in many of the cities in the country.[3] Moreover, the protests have been described as one of the unique examples in the history of Turkey in which people from various political viewpoints, even from ones which are diametrically opposed came together and collaborated during these protests.[4] The protests were comprised of marches, a two-week occupation of Gezi Park, creative performances, and the use of humor in street art and chants. These were new elements in the history of Turkish social movements.[5] Young participants' concerns and modes of communication lent the protests the majority of their content and tone.

Most of the young participants in the Gezi protests were members of the post-1980 generation, whose uninterested attitude towards politics has been deemed a result of having grown up within the de-politicized atmosphere following the military coup of 1980. Moreover, like their peers of the neoliberal age, they have been widely characterized as individualistic, consumerist, and uninterested in social issues. The Gezi protests therefore invalidated established perceptions about young people's relationships to politics. Although the perception that the youth are apolitical had been criticized by social scientists in the field of youth studies,[6] the protests made it clear that young people's relationships with the political sphere need to be understood in a deeper, more complex manner, beyond an apolitical/political binary opposition.[7]

Focusing on the experiences of young participants in the Gezi protests, this article aims to discover the diverse ways in which young people relate to the political. The concept of emergency is employed as an analytical lens to open up a way to include the simultaneous and sudden character of the protests and to underline the mode of young people's dissent. Taking the protests as a cultural process through which young people continued to reflect upon, redefine, and construct their relationships to the political, the transformative aspects of their experiences will be scrutinized and discussed with regard to the possibility of a new political youth culture.

2_Emergency as Protest, Emergency in Protest

Emergency mostly refers to physically urgent situations that appear unexpectedly. The state of emergency is an extraordinary rupture in the routine of everyday life, which usually brings about a crisis to be survived and managed through rapid actions.

Protests often indicate social states of emergency. Protestors no longer agree with the existing situation and the ways their lives are regulated, and therefore show their

dissent and demand an immediate change. Thus, protests express a social problem that needs to be coped with in order to be able to return to everyday life. The protest cycle — including marches, occupations of public areas, and semi-permanent camps — also presents an extraordinary situation to be organized. Meeting the protestors' physical needs such as hunger, thirst, shelter, sleep, as well as acting collectively and making crucial decisions, are all types of emergency actions that ensure the protestors' survival. Therefore, emergency reflects an urgent social need for change, which lays the groundwork for a protest as well as for state-of-emergency modes of collective action.

Victor Turner, in analyzing the ritualistic dimension of the cultural process, underlines the notion of 'liminality' in the phase of social change. Liminality is an inbetweenness and ambiguity outside the limits of structural order and carries the potential to be "the venue and occasion for radical scepticism — always relative, of course, to the given culture's repertoire of sceptical concepts and images — about cherished values and rules".[8] Turner calls the collectivity that emerges in the process of this liminal experience *communitas.* In contrast to structure, in communitas, participants are not there to play their status-determined roles, but as "'human totals', integral beings who recognizantly share the same humanity." Thus, this form of collectivity is free from the existing structural rules and status levels. Turner also identifies countercultural communes, and specifically hippies, as examples of communitas.[9] Underlining the performative dimension of collective identity, Bernhard Giesen reads communities through symbols and rituals. Taking a closer look at political performances, he states that political performances are usually rituals of collective identity; for example,

> […] fights between protestors and the police are, evidently, not rational deliberations about the common good or strategic choices in a power game. […] They are not rational decisions between independent citizens, but ritual constructions of community or of authority.[10]

Inspired by a cultural performative approach to analyzing social reality, this paper uses the concept of emergency as a point of departure for understanding young people's protest experiences. How protest as a liminal space emerging out of a demand for change points to a potential for radical skepticism and critical transformation is one of the main questions that this analysis attempts to answer. Furthermore, how young peo-

ple define their notions of the political will be studied with reference to young participants' experiences of the rituals of protesting and values of trust, solidarity, and collectivity.

3_Studying Social Movements, the Political, and Youth

Social movements have long been studied in terms of the masses, participants' goals, and their power/ability to influence the political sphere. Participants' motivations and the manner of their involvement have mostly been ignored by the grand theories of social movements, which either focus on resource mobilization or on historical systemic conflicts, both of which are structural explanations of people's collective actions. Regarding the limits of these grand theories in understanding social movements, James J. Jasper points to an interpretive and action-oriented theorizing. Defining culture as cognition, emotion, and morality, he calls for an analysis focusing on the cultural, underlining meaning and interaction. In doing so, he directs attention to the participants of the social movements as individuals and to their actions.[11] People's points of view, their motivations, and their experiences are central to this cultural approach of social movement research. Manuel Castells, who studies recent online and urban-based protest movements, emphasizes the individual in social movements. He states that, while grouping people's experiences into analytical categories of social structure is a useful method, the actual practices that generate social movements and change social structures are enacted by individuals. Thus, we have to understand the motivation of each individual in detail.[12] This paper analyzes the individual reflections of young people involved in the Gezi protests, focusing on the diversity and complexity of their protest experiences.

In his research on the counter-globalization movements of the 2000s, Yavuz Yıldırım finds that the concept of 'the political' became more important than the concepts of 'politics' and 'policy' as social movements started to specify their demands in order to construct a grassroots democracy. While 'politics' mostly connotes institutional limits, 'the political' provides more space for the intervention of ordinary people.[13] In parallel to this discussion, this paper regards 'the political' as a conceptual tool for placing emphasis on the politics of the people, the street, and everyday life, without limiting it to institutional dimensions. Moreover, following Therese O'Toole, Michael

Lister, Dave Marsh, Su Jones, and Alex McDonag's methodological approach in conducting field research with young people, 'the political' will be used as a broad term without tight theoretical limitations, avoiding narrow and top-down definitions. Broadening the conception of 'the political' in that way, O'Toole et al. focus on how individuals conceive of politics and interpret politics as a "lived experience" that refers to what they find to be political in their lives, rather than responding to adult-made[14] definitions of the political and politics.[15] In terms of understanding the young people involved in the Gezi protests, this approach provides the possibility to overcome the limits of mainstream, adult-centered conceptions of political activity that are at the heart of the constructed apolitical/political duality.

Youth as a social category cannot merely be defined in terms of age or biological development. Being young reflects a power relation based on age,[16] similar to how gender reflects a power relation based on sex. The need to understand being young also relates to the need to understand the construction of this age-based power relation. Moreover, the meaning of youth is always context-specific. Rather than merely defining youth as a time period between certain ages in people's lives and attributing certain universal characteristics to that period, most social scientists agree that youth is a socially-constructed category. As a product of modernity, youth consists of different experiences in various socio-economic conditions.[17] Socioeconomic situation, gender identity, and ethnic and cultural belonging all shape the experience of being young. Thus, the definition of youth is socially and culturally bounded. For this reason, how youth is experienced in different contexts is one of the main questions of this study. In studying youth in the context of protest, I use the concept of emergency to discuss young people's various ways of experiencing protest, with the aim of discovering generational aspects of the need for social change.[18]

4_Methodology

This article is based on interviews conducted with young participants of the Gezi protests in İstanbul. Between September 2013 and July 2015, forty in-depth interviews were conducted with protestors between the ages of 18–30.[19] These interviews focused on young peoples' individual reasons for participation, their experiences of the Gezi protests, and their reflections on the notions of youth and the political. In terms of age and gender distribution, 30 of the interviewees were between ages 18–25, while ten

were between 25–30. Twenty-three were female, 16 were male, and one identified as transgender. Twenty-two were students and 18 either worked (in various sectors) or were unemployed. A broad spectrum of interviewees was chosen to reflect the variety of social and political backgrounds of participants. The data used in this paper include interviews with activists from ecological, feminist, LGBT, and right-to-city movements, as well as young people who do not have any political affiliation.

My fieldwork focuses on the voices and concerns of young people, and so the interviews were conducted in a way that would allow interviewees the space to share their experiences. Using "active and methodological listening," the aim was to understand the data emerging throughout the interview in the context of the specific social background of the interviewee.[20] The interviews were structured by open-ended simple questions and minimal interventions, when necessary.

The fieldwork material was analyzed by identifying themes found in the full transcriptions of all the interviews. Young participants' experiences of the Gezi protests and their reflections on the notion of the political, as two of the main discussions that emerged from the extensive data, will be presented here as the initial results of the data analysis, which remains a work in progress.

5_"Politics landed on earth for the first time": Unhappiness and the Need for Expression

Many young people reported that they had been informed about the protests via social media. They emphasized the spontaneity of their participation, as they had not planned to go to the protests in advance, but found themselves on the street spontaneously. Spontaneity does not refer to causeless participation; on the contrary, it points to a feeling of emergency in which young people, mostly without second thought, went to support the people in the park. Many young people stated that the witnessing of violence as it spread through social media was the main reason for their participation:

> What brought me there was the police violence, that is to say when they burned the tents and dragged people [through the streets], violence was the main reason for me. (Student, 24)

Events leading up to the protests and the political atmosphere of the country also influenced young people's dissent, paving the way for the protests. The police force's attitude towards the May 1st demonstrations in 2013, the decision to destroy the historic Emek Cinema, the proposed ban on abortion, and the regulation of alcohol are just

some of the important events that interviewees mentioned had made them feel that their freedom was restricted.[21] Material problems and inequalities, the lack of autonomy that young people face in their lives, from education and the workplace to within their own families, were also brought up as factors that played into feelings of insecurity, anxiety, uneasiness, and unhappiness. With this aspect, these protests reflect the "emotional outburst" of individuals who felt ignored or misrepresented.[22]

The need to protect Gezi Park was also linked to young people's relationship with the city. Taksim, where Gezi Park is located, is a central gathering point on the European side of the city, where many young people (especially those from the middle class) spend their free time, attend cultural events, eat in restaurants, etc. Moreover, Taksim is the heart of political events and organizations. Many oppositional groups, as well as groups from new social movements, are located in Taksim. Given the significance of this location, reconstruction plans in Taksim were perceived as an intervention in one of the most important places for young people. All in all, young people felt under pressure from several directions. One of the interviewees describes her feelings before the protests as such:

> I remember that I was so unhappy a few months ago, before the protests, the time that the oppression increased, and the events of the May 1st demonstrations, Emek Cinema… It was like a stick beating against my head, and it was like it exploded, then it was very much like a relief. (Unemployed, 30)

This quotation characterizes the protests as an emergency, as the result of an unbearable emotional situation and an outlet for self-expression. It can be argued that this emotional outburst did not reflect an individual, but rather a generational mood, and that the situation was not unpredictable. In her study of the post-1980 generation's concerns, which aims to move beyond their stigmatization as apolitical and apathetic, Demet Lüküslü states that young people are not uninterested in politics. Rather, they are highly critical of the political sphere and can not find any space to express themselves. Therefore, they chose to be "necessary conformists." That is to say, young people felt unhappy and uneasy in their socio-political atmosphere, however, rather than explicitly revolt against the system, they use humor and ridicule to deal with their unhappiness[23]. Participating in the protests became a way of expressing dissent publicly, still using humor and youthful language, but in an open and collective manner. Young people's dissent emerged as a reflection of their need to be heard and seen as they are. Some of the interviewees' accounts clearly depict the degree of young people's desperation,

which has increased continuously, and especially in the period approaching the protests. One interviewee stated:

> It is really hard to be young in Turkey… We constantly think about going away, it's always on our mind. However, if we do not struggle, who will change this country, how will this country change, how will we do this? If we obey them in everything they demand, then no one can live. Therefore we do not go anywhere, even if we have this idea of going away. It is really hard to live here. It is politically hard at the same time, people do not have freedom. (Student and feminist activist, 21)

The fact that protests are spaces for self-expression is also strongly linked to the potential of the protest experience to generate alternative relations with politics: politics becomes an available reality instead of an abstract position. One of the interviewees framed it in a very telling way:

> When these events (protests) occur, individuals one by one said: "Let's go, people are able to talk there." Politics has landed on earth for the first time; it was always in the air previously. (Employed, 28)

The significance of the protest was not only that young people overcame the borders of conventional politics, in which they do not feel the opportunity to express themselves as adults, but also surpassed their parents' limiting and oppressive attitude. One of the interviewees said:

> These parents have raised their children to be too individualistic and career oriented, I know that many people feel oppressed by this... That is why I think my generation is under severe pressure. What happened in Gezi was not only against the state, but also against the family. Our generation had a really hard time 'coming of age', but Gezi made us grow up. (Student and ecological activist, 22)

The emphasis on "coming of age" also points to the experience of being young in a power relationship based on age-hierarchy. The Gezi protests have been an opportunity for young people to create a space free of adult prejudices and expectations. This can be interpreted as an act of reclaiming youthfulness, described as individuality, creativity, and lightness, and being free from anxiety over the prospect of a future that is continuously controlled by the family and state.[24] One of the interviewees commented on the experience of being young in the Gezi protests:

> Indeed, being young is so hard, but it was easier in Gezi Park. But it was a two-week-long dream, we woke up, and it is again so hard. There, many things were easy, everything was in our hands, we could go directly and eat, we could have a book from the library in the park and look through it, we could play volleyball in the park, we could dance the *halay* or *horon*,[25] we were sharing with the others, contacts were so strong, but then when it finished, we returned to our usual lives, to our lives in Turkey. (Student and LGBT activist, 21)

As the respondent here describes, the protest space served as a retreat from young people's usual lives. Surpassing the ever-present limitations and pressures of the adult world, whether of the family or of state institutions, young people constructed a liminal space as a result of their sense of emergency. The liminal is where being young is easier. It is a space that is free from deprivation: a collective kitchen and a library were set up in the park, and participants played football and danced whenever they wanted. It was a space for finding others and discovering a sense of togetherness. The protest experience gave young people some sort of generational consciousness. Most likely, it was the first time they felt connected to their generational peers in a positive sense, as opposed to in a shared sense of guilt at being the members of an uninterested and apathetic generation. An interviewee states that:

> At least our generation came together; we understood that our expectations or aspirations, our grief and worries about the future are the same. This has been really important for us... (Employed, 28)

Young people realized that they not only share similar concerns and life experiences with their peers, but also spend time sharing similar activities, especially within online spaces. Online games, and spending time in cyber space in general, are usually considered "doing nothing"[26] by adults; however, these were the main sources of the youthful character of the protests. One of the interviewees said that:

> People were so happy in the Gezi protests. Because they were promising hope and people became aware that they were not the only one, there were many others killing time on 9GAG[27]... I was also relieved to find out in the Gezi process that I was not crazy! (Student and ecological activist, 22)

It can be argued that the protest offered a space for individuals to recognize one another, to discover their commonalities in the public space and realize that they are not unconnected, but linked via instantaneous communications and passive networks that carry the potential for building solidarity.[28]

Young participants emphasized the attitude of police forces against the initial protestors in the park as one of the triggers that prompted them to take to the streets. In addition, they were feeling insecure, unhappy, and oppressed because of several socioeconomic and political reasons, and these feelings laid the ground for the emotional upheaval that prepared the Gezi protests. Even if this outburst indicates an emergency, how these feelings were constructed up until the protests reflects a history on its own, as detailed in young people's individual narratives. Therefore, it can be argued that the

protests did not simply come out of the blue. Rather, their urgency and suddenness is embedded in a history of feeling oppressed and an accompanying need for outlets of expression amongst young people. The protests were a space where young people's immediate need to express themselves could be fulfilled, and their expression took the forms of humor and creative performances. Moreover, young participants built up a generational consciousness and feeling of collectivity through this shared process of expression. How have these feelings of commonality and collectivity translated into values? Could these values be a basis for a new understanding of the political?

6_From Rituals to Values, Practices, and Everyday Life: Redefining Politics

When describing their experience of the protests, most interviewees began with small anecdotes which, for them, reflect the spirit of the Gezi movement. The "spirit of Gezi" has been an umbrella phrase for the values such as collectivity, sharing, protecting each other in case of danger, being kind to others, and respecting differences. These were the aspects of the protests through which participants started to imagine themselves as members of a community. One of the interviewees provides an example:

> I had forgotten to close my backpack while I was running out of the park; I think I had tried to find something, water or something. While rushing around in the middle of this turmoil, I heard the sound of the zipper of my backpack. I had left it open, and someone had closed it while we were running. I have so many little memories like this. (Student, 24)

The interviewees told many anecdotes similar to this one, which included stories about sharing water or food or saying "sorry" when they hit one another while running. These are all small and basic practices and gestures. However, it seems that all these little things were reflections of values that young people felt had been absent for a long time. What they discovered in the protest experience was therefore a mode of relating to one another. One of the interviewees shared her irritation about the importance attributed to people's place of origin and points to the discriminatory potential of classifying people this way. However, in the park, an ideal setting in her eyes, no one cared about people's origins:

> When I was little, if someone hit me while walking, I would usually say excuse me, but the one who hit me would go straight ahead. In the park, there were thousands of people but no one hit one another. I was surprised. Or no one asked, "Where are you from?" If someone asks my origin, I say I am an adopted child; my origin is none of your business! No one asked about my origin in this park, people asked about my blood type or if I was hungry. (Unemployed, 30)

Information about blood types was collected in case protesters required immediate treatment of injuries. Offers of food indicate that participants were concerned for each other's health and well-being. These are all state-of-emergency actions. Participants developed consciousness of how, in their daily lives, socially constructed divisions limit interaction, cooperation, and solidarity. Political tendencies, ethnicity, and place of origin function as important determinants of people's relations. Another interviewee underlines aspects of communication and solidarity. Participants listened to each other, and political groups that were thought to never come together cooperated in the park:

> It is possible to talk about real solidarity in Gezi Park. I do not mention only food, free tobacco or the revolution market.[29] Actually, we were, like, really listening, I had the feeling that people listen to each other. There were many flags of different parties. The leftist groups, the LGBTs, etc., were there, they had their tables close to each other, they were in solidarity, sharing their stuff, I saw all this. (Student, 24)

The two weeks spent in Gezi Park were a space for young people to practice these values in numerous ways, and it had a life-changing effect on many. Many interviewees described this period as a utopia and a dream — as an exceptional time. The practice of commune life in the park undoubtedly had a political-theoretical basis, relating mainly to anti-capitalism and people's desire to control their own conditions and shape their environment. An ecological activist states:

> All the things that we have discussed before — alternative economy, solidarity economy, city gardens — all of a sudden, all of them came true in Gezi Park. The small world we imagined has started to exist. (Student and ecological activist, 24)

Communal living was the practice of what was thought to be impossible. It therefore had the effect of changing people's thoughts and lives. It reflects the transformative potential of the liminal, of being between real life and utopia. The commune experience in Gezi Park enabled participants to realize what they imagined. An interviewee describes his experience as a very special one in his life:

> There was the culture of sharing. Everything was functioning well, there was the health group, the kitchen group, the cleaning group, and we all had our gloves on and picked up the mess in the mornings. It was really a camp site, a huge camping zone, and there was a wonderful communal life. When I think about it now, this was a very special part of my life — as if I lived in a different place and then I woke up and came back to life. It was like a dream, a one- or two-week dream for Turkey or İstanbul. (Student and LGBT activist, 21)

Interviewees also reported problems and crisis situations within this dream-like commune experience, such as the quarrels between political groups, noncompliance with

collective decisions, or the scarcity of resources in the park. However, all these difficult moments did not seem to degrade the experience as a realization of utopian values.

When the occupation was ended by police intervention, people in the park decided to continue with meetings in other parks in various neighborhoods. This was the end of the commune period, but the start of a new practice. Participants viewed this time as an experimental school for politics, during which they felt free to express themselves without limitations. Young people whose sole affiliations were as Gezi protestors[30] have been mostly critical about the way oppositional political parties participate in these forums, since they tend to overpower the discussions and approach the forum participants as potential members of their parties. However, despite all these problems, young people mostly view the park forum and neighborhood meetings as processes through which they became politicized. These meetings in parks and neighborhoods became the places where the transformative potential that emerged from the protest period was transferred to normal life. This promised a long-term, subtle politicizing effect that was embedded in everyday life and focused on changing social norms. The aim was not rapid change in institutions or in the current state of affairs. One of the respondents states that:

> What politicized people was not Gezi or the 15 days in the park, because that was like a dream. Afterwards it changed and became a park forum, then neighborhood forums, and then occupation houses. It is gradually emerged like this and this process itself was the real one that politicized people. (Employed and right-to-city activist, 23)

By the final phase of my field research in July 2015, some of these park and neighborhood forums were still active, while some had moved to online platforms. However, forums around İstanbul were not as lively as they had been just after the Gezi protests. After the dispersion of many of the forums, the Gezi process seemed to be finalized. Young participants reacted differently when asked to evaluate the whole process. Disappointment had emerged as a significant mode of reflection:

> Many people took to the streets, we hoped that many things would change, and since this did not happen, we are disappointed. However, since I still have some hope, I will continue. (Student and ecological activist, 24)

The protest and the commune period were described mostly as life-changing, dream-like experiences. However, encounters with the police and physical and psychological stress had traumatic effects on participants. Many people are now afraid of participating

in political protests, as they learned what the consequences can be. A respondent situates young people's hesitation as follows:

> People are scared, I know. They are seriously afraid of getting involved, being blacklisted, if something bad happens to them, if a gas bomb explodes when they are in a demonstration… Many fears and anxieties… This is why many people do not take part. (Student and right-to-city activist, 30)

While evaluating the results of the Gezi protests, an interviewee claimed that the most significant consequences were not the material victories of the protests, such as the blocking of the shopping mall's construction. Rather, the process itself had irreversible effects.[31] Young people started to come together, to communicate, and to act collectively. One interviewee calls this the "new personality":

> The main benefit is that a new personality emerged in people. What happened after Gezi? The main achievement is not the prevention of the construction of a shopping mall there. The main achievement is that people started to touch one another, learn about their perspectives, and change their approaches towards each other… What is important for me is this change. (Student and LGBT activist, 25)

This emphasis on the change in how young people relate to one another and the transformative impact of the protests are important for understanding how the notion of the political has been reconstructed since the protests. Young people who were already active in new social movements — feminism, ecological and LGBT activism — before Gezi brought their understanding and practical know-how into political practice. This clearly shows that the Gezi protests did not emerge out of nothing, but were grounded upon preexisting experiences and political practices.[32] Also, young people who did not have any political affiliation before the Gezi protests came to them with various understandings of the political. The reconstruction of the political during the protests is not just a result of the convergence of these different levels of relating to and practicing the political, but also of the way in which these extremely diverse understandings and practices blended. As underlined above, how participants related to each other and to their environment is one of the main aspects of this blending. An interviewee defines the political as follows:

> For me, it starts with relationships. It is about how we relate to others and how we live… How do we share our place, what do we eat and drink, how do we live, how do we form relationships based on trust? If we cannot trust each other, we cannot change anything. (Employed and ecological activist, 30)

The emphasis on trust here reveals the importance of values in the reconstruction of the political. The political is formed on the grounds of values on which one's relationship

to the world and to him/herself is constructed; moreover, the political is developed in how these values guide one in everyday life, and how real and honest one is in internalizing these values. One of the respondents explains her understanding of the political as being equal to the ethical, emphasizing her own positioning and practices as central to the notion of the political:

> I am trying to live life, and politics means being as ethical as possible in my relationship to life and to myself. To the extent I can do this free from systemic impositions, I think that I will be political. Resistance, etc., all these have that kind of a meaning for me, and this type of being political brings along some specific acts. (Student and LGBT activist, 27)

Another respondent explains how "everything became political" for her — ironic for the generation that has been labeled apolitical. This account also points to the very dynamic of how the definition of the political is changing for young people:

> If you want to save the trees, as it was in Gezi protests, or if you want to save your rivers, you are opposing the system, because these are the things imposed upon you by the system and when you oppose, as a matter of course you became political. The '90s generation is always referred as apolitical, but we became political out of necessity. For example, I didn't think that what I was doing was food politics, I realized afterwards how valuable a seed is. Okay, it's just a seed, normally it's like flowers or birds, and you may think why do all these need to be political, however, our time is the one in which all these things became political. (Student and ecological activist, 24)

The political is reconstructed mainly in the details of everyday life. Moreover, young people described the political as doing, acting, and performing — that is to say, the political means practice, not theory or discussion:

> … They perceive politics as words, as making comments to each other. However, it is not like this. The political is life itself, what you wear, your style, your position in life, your way of communicating with a person… (Unemployed and LGBT activist, 20)

As these participants describe, the notion of the political refers to values, as well as to how people perform these values in everyday life. This description of the political reflects a critical stance towards conventional politics. Young people's relationships with conventional politics is weakening day by day. Participants in my field research, in accordance with results from previous qualitative studies conducted in Turkey,[33] usually explain their lack of interest in politics by their perceptions of traditional politics as a dirty and dishonest sphere that has no effect on their lives. Instead, they opt for a more human-based politics in which people's opportunities to express themselves and participate in decisions is central. One of the interviewees says:

> (Politics is) letting the people express themselves, giving them authority… If you only let the people express themselves once every five years, this is not representative democracy. I see the issue as a question of rights. People should be able to make decisions about the place they live in, their education, the taxes they pay… My understanding of the political is not about political ideologies, but about living humanely. (Student and right-to-city activist, 23)

An emphasis on everyday life, values, and practices underlines and reveals these interviewees' concerns with conventional politics. By broadening the space of the political to include all spheres of everyday life and evaluating their practices within the framework of values, young people attempt to alter the institutional limitations of conventional politics.

7_Conclusion

This article focused on young people involved in the Gezi protests. It studied their experiences of protest and drew upon the concept of emergency. Young people's reasons for participation in the protests and the meanings they attributed to the protests highlight their need to express themselves and to escape a social state of emergency, characterized by unhappiness, oppression, and insecurity. These feelings laid the groundwork for a new generational consciousness as well as for an emotional upheaval that led young people to become the participants of the Gezi protests. These feelings were also translated into values such as collectivity, respect, trust, and solidarity during the course of the protests. This translation, and its transformative potential, is interpreted as the main accomplishment of young people involved in the Gezi protests. Young people have reconstructed the notion of the political, grounded in values as they are practiced and performed in everyday life. This way of reflecting upon the notion of the political offers a way of understanding the basis of a new political youth culture.

The findings of this work are limited by its case study. Most participants were students and employed young people, and therefore the participant profile does not include youth from the lowest socio-economic strata of the society. Moreover, the differences of the experiences of young participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic background have not been emphasized, due to the paper's focus on the commonalities of young people's relation with the political. Being aware of these limitations, this paper developed an understanding of young people's ways of relating to the notion of the political in Turkey focusing on Gezi protests. It is important to note that in-depth future research with young people from different social, cultural, and political backgrounds in various contexts will contribute to a holistic understanding of youth in

society, as well as their relation with the political. Emergency as a concept has been used in this work as an alternative way to approach young people's politics, but undoubtedly, the need for the discovery of new concepts and approaches going beyond the limitations of traditional concepts and categories in studying young people's relation with politics, continues.

_Endnotes

1 This article is based on my doctoral research, entitled "Youth in Protest: Cultural Practices, Politics and Being Young in Turkey" which is a work in progress. I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor Prof. Jörn Ahrens for all his support throughout my research. I would like to thank my second supervisor Assoc. Prof. Demet Lüküslü for her invaluable comments on an early version of this article. I also thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial board of *On_Culture* for their comments, and I am grateful to the *International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture* (GCSC) for its financial support.

2 *KONDA, Gezi Raporu [Gezi Report],* accessed 1 January, 2016, <http://www.konda.com.tr/tr/raporlar/KONDA_GeziRaporu2014.pdf>.

3 According to news referring to the data provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs: Tolga Şardan, "2.5 milyon insan 79 ilde sokağa indi," *milliyet.com.tr*, June 23, 2013, accessed 2 January, 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2-5-milyon-insan-79-ilde-sokaga/gundem/detay/1726600/default.htm>.

4 This narrative of togetherness undoubtedly deserves a more detailed analysis. My field data indicates that the collocation of different groups and protestors is also characterized by internal and external conflicts and disputes, in addition to collaboration and types of helping each other.

5 "New" does not refer to the new discovery of these ways and modes of protest in Turkey, but rather to the new, blended, and distinct ways in which they are being used.

6 Cf. Leyla Neyzi, "Object or Subject? The Paradox of 'Youth' in Turkey," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001), 411–432; Cf. Demet Lüküslü, *Türkiye'de Gençlik Miti [The Myth of Youth in Turkey]* (İstanbul: İletişim Publishing, 2009).

7 The conceptualization of apolitical vs. political is worthy of analysis in itself. This paper does not enter into this discussion in depth, since its primary concern is young people's protest experience. However, young people's reflections, as well as definitions of the apolitical as a way to understand their relation with the political, are addressed. For a recent discussion within the discipline of psychology on the discourse of apolitical youth and the ways it functions, see: Bahar Tanyaş, "Gençler ve Politik Katılım: Gezi Parkı Eylemleri'nde 'Apolitik' Nesil" ["Young people and political participation: The 'apolitical' generation in the Gezi Park Protests,"] in *Eleştirel Psikoloji Bülteni [Critical Psychology Bulletin]* 6 (2015), 25–50.

8 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 102.

9 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94–130.

10 Bernhard Giesen, "A Durkheimian perspective on the performative turn," in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 325–363, here: 353.

11   James J. Jasper, "Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?" in *Sociology Compass* 4/11 (2010), 965–976.

12   Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 13.

13   Yavuz Yıldırım, "The Differences of Gezi Park Resistance in Turkish Social Movements," in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 4. No. 5 (1), March (2014), 177–185, here: 178.

14   This critical usage of "adult-made," which is often used in youth studies, underlines the limitedness of conceptualizations made regardless of young people's own definitions and viewpoints in understanding youth.

15   Therese O'Toole et al., "Tuning Out or Left Out? Participation and Non-Participation among Young People," in *Contemporary Politics* 9/1 (2003), 45–61, here: 52–53.

16   Pierre Bourdieu, "'Youth' is Just a Word," in *Sociology in Question*, Pierre Bourdieu (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 94–101, here: 94.

17   Johanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997).

18   For a detailed discussion of the notion of urgency in relation to working class young people's ways of coping with social and economic exclusion, please see: Deniz Yonucu, "Capitalism, Desperation and Urgency," in *Red Thread Online Journal* 3 (2011), n. p., accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.red-thread.org/en/article.asp?a=52>.

19   This research treats the Gezi protests as a process that includes on-street protests, the occupation of the Park, and the forums that took place afterwards; therefore, young people's participation refers to participation in all of these phases. There were two interviewees who were not in the country during the protests; however, because they were active in online platforms throughout that period and actively participated in forums and meetings in the aftermath of the protests when they came back to Turkey, they are referred to as participants.

20   Pierre Bourdieu, "Understanding," in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 607–626, here: 609.

21   The important social and political events that led up to the Gezi protests deserve more detailed analysis. In this paper, however, they are mentioned as they emerged in the interviews — as the background of young people's feelings.

22   Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), here: 15.

23   Cf. Demet Lüküslü, *Türkiye'de Gençlik Miti [The Myth of Youth in Turkey]* (İstanbul: İletişim Publishing, 2009), here: 189–194.

24   Cf. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2010) here: 18–19.

25   *Halay* is the traditional folk dance of the eastern part of Turkey; *horon* is the traditional folk dance of the region near the Black Sea.

26   For a discussion on young people and "doing nothing", please see J. Abbott-Chapman and M. Robinson, "Leisure Activities, Place and Identity," in *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, ed. Andy Furlong (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

27   9GAG is an online platform on which internet memes, humorous photos, and videos are shared and uploaded.

[28] Cf. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2010), 23.

[29] Revolution market is the name of the tent inside the park where food and beverages were brought and distributed for free to protestors.

[30] "*Gezici*" as it is used in Turkish.

[31] For a discussion on the long term transformative effects of the protests for feminist participants, see Buket Türkmen, "Gezi Direnişi ve Kadın Özneler" ["Gezi resistance and women subjects",] in *Kültür ve İletişim [Culture and Communication]* 34 (2014), 11–35.

[32] Cf. Pınar Gümüş and Volkan Yılmaz, "Chapter 10: Where did Gezi come from? Exploring the Links between Youth Political Activism before and during the Gezi Protests," in *'Everywhere Taksim': Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi*, eds. Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 185–199.

[33] For a detailed discussion on young people's perceptions of the traditional politics, please see Demet Lüküslü, *Türkiye'de Gençlik Miti [The Myth of Youth in Turkey]* (İstanbul: İletişim Publishing, 2009), 145–166.