

Chapter 4

Political Humor in the Face of Neoliberal Authoritarianism in Turkey¹

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Istanbul and many other cities across Turkey witnessed a widespread insurgency in the early summer of 2013. Gezi Park, a green area next to Istanbul's central Taksim Square, became the principal site and springboard of this resistance. Following the violent eviction of a sit-in at the park that was being conducted in protest of the park's demolition as part of the government's urban development plan, a heterogeneous crowd with divergent agendas filled the streets to counter the government's neoliberal and increasingly authoritarian policies. Among the protesters were groups with a long history and experience of street resistance, including feminists, anarchists, socialists, workers' unions, environmentalists, and LGBTQ activists, as well as those who found themselves protesting alongside these groups for perhaps the first time: secularists, high school and university students, anti-capitalist Muslims, Turkish "aunties", soccer fans, nationalists, and shanty town dwellers (Arat 2013; Gürcan and Peker 2015; Yörük 2014).²

The absence of a coherent political agenda to animate the uprisings was captured in a young protester's graffiti from the early days of the resistance, which became one of the most popular slogans of the Gezi protests. "Kahrolsun *bazı* şeyler!" ("Down with *some* things!") (emphasis added), the graffiti read, misspelling the Turkish word "some" (*bazı*), and humorously expressing rejection and criticism mixed with confusion and uncertainty, but without articulating a specific target. *Some* thing was wrong with the way things were, but one needed to go beyond the conventions of language and reason to be able to address it. This necessity found its best expression in satirical images, statements, and performances that inundated both streets and screens at the time. In addition to sit-in protests, violent encounters with the police, and commune-type gatherings in the occupied Gezi Park, the youth

performed resistance through graffiti, banners, stencils, bodily performances, and slogans in the streets; and shared images of these in cyberspace, along with memes, Photoshopped images, and other social media based jokes.³ These performative acts targeted the police, the media, the government and its supporters, as well as the protesters themselves. They drew heavily on popular culture, and created a culture of public joy, lightness, and hilarity in the midst of fear, distress, and anger.

Seizing on the political use of humor in Turkey's Gezi protests, this chapter explores the relationship between humor and power in contemporary activist actions against neoliberal authoritarianism. Scholars have focused on the fact that Turkish neoliberalism under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth AKP) has wedded economic policies of privatization, deregulation, and free market capitalism to conservative religion, populist nationalism, and heightened state control, leading citizens into new forms of subjection and resistance (Bozkurt 2013; Lelandais 2014; Tuğal 2009). The incongruous effects of this combination have been particularly identifiable in the political economy of space; that is, the ways in which the AKP regime extracted and accumulated capital through state investments in construction, real state, and infrastructure (Demirtas-Milz 2013; Karaman 2013), as well as rent generation and land appropriation in both urban and rural settings (Boratav 2016).⁴ The urban poor who suffered under these new policies also became absorbed into the new market economy and ideological axis of the AKP regime.

The planned destruction and redevelopment of the city's most centrally located public park epitomized this phenomenon, and thus led to analyses that emphasize the spatiality of the Gezi events (Erensü and Karaman 2017) as a revolt against the impoverishing consequences of neoliberal urban renewal (Kuymulu 2013; Tuğal 2013). Others have argued that the forms of dispossession (brought to the forefront through the Gezi resistance) have roots not only in the AKP's neoliberal policies but also in the discriminatory property regime, dispossession and state violence against the minorities on which the Turkish nation state was founded (Parla and Özgül 2016; Tambar 2016). What underpinned such violence was a series of moral and affective investments beyond economic policies, pointing to an ambivalent alliance between neoliberal and authoritarian discourses (Gürcan and Peker 2015). Hence, although the aims and targets of civic unrest became diversified by the addition of other messages over time, the protesters were most vocal in their grievances against the AKP's implementation of conservative practices and oppressive interventions in "lifestyles" (*yasam tarzına müdahale*), which only accelerated in the aftermath of the Gezi events. It was precisely at this level of moral and social life

that comedy operated while addressing “the AKP’s authoritarian-neoliberal-Islamist machinery” (Erensi and Karaman 2017, 22).

Against a backdrop of social unrest, this paper examines comedy’s encounter with neoliberal authoritarianism in two different but interrelated registers. The first concerns the various ways in which humor becomes a form of dissent against hegemonic discourses, social inequalities, and the authoritarian regimes surrounding neoliberal politics. I interrogate how humorous language, images, and performances during the Gezi events expanded the range of street politics and destabilized political targets in unexpected ways. In light of recent commentaries on the aesthetics of new social movements and global uprisings (Hart and Bos 2007; Haugerud 2013; Makar 2011; Wedeen 2013), my analysis highlights not only the ideological and discursive aspects of humor in the realm of electoral politics, but also its embodied manifestations in moments of insurgency and immediacy. I further suggest that these manifestations are where the subversive potentialities of political satire against neoliberal logic reside and, paradoxically, to which they are bound. This is why we do not see the same political potency in social media based jokes inspired by Gezi humor in the aftermath of the revolt.

Humor does not stand outside the existing power structures, authoritative discourses, and social norms that it so often targets. The producers, performers, objects, and audiences of humor are all situated in particular cultural contexts and relate to one another through multiple networks of power. Like any form of social communication, humor can be both emancipatory and disciplinary, a force for unification as well as exclusion and division (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 214). Accordingly, this paper suggests that the novel aesthetic forms of humorous activism that emerged with the Gezi Park protests operated *within* and *through*—rather than against—existing cultural expressions and political divisions, inseparable today from neoliberal techniques of governance. In particular, I discuss how (and when) this activism entailed acts of symbolic violence that tended to reinforce, rather than subvert, political conventions. By juxtaposing humor’s revolutionary and oppressive capacities, we can see that humor is not epiphenomenal to political discourse, but shapes in significant ways the kinds of political messages people align themselves with, the various modes of in- and out-group interaction that these discourses take place within, and the tensions inherent in neoliberal authoritarianism.

In what follows, I first contextualize Gezi humor historically and politically, using a critical review of studies on Turkish satire. I then examine specific aspects of Gezi Park humor as examples of resistance, symbolic violence, and sociality. In this section, I highlight the significance of humor’s operational materialities, such as the context and means of its mediation, in shaping the very relationship between humor and politics. I show how the

material-aesthetic forms in which humor is performed reflect and reconfigure the political practice of activism in its social embeddedness. Through these examples, I foreground my argument that political humor in neoliberal times simultaneously enacts and subverts the everyday relations of power in which it is entrenched.

THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL SATIRE IN TURKEY

Although it has been unusual to witness humor as an embodied and digitally mediated component of street politics in Turkish political culture until very recently, Gezi Park humor did not emerge in a vacuum. Satire has a long history in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey and has been popularized through print media since at least the late nineteenth century. Studies on Turkish humor, which have focused almost exclusively on political cartoons and satirical magazines, have regarded humor as reflective of cultural tensions, ideological divisions, pressures of the market, and the political aspirations of the times of their publication (Apaydin 2005; Brummett 1995, 2007; Göçek 1998; Öncü 1999, 2001). A language of binaries dominates these works, while the content of such binaries has shifted along with the political era under scrutiny.

Ottoman and Turkish cartoons of the early twentieth century, for instance, have been analyzed in terms of their representation of gendered dilemmas of modernization and secularization (Brummett 1995; Gencer 2013). Ayhan Akman (1997) uses the term “cultural schizophrenia” to address the ambivalences of identity along this gendered binary of East and West in Turkish cartoons from the formative years of the Turkish Republic (1920–1950). It is noteworthy that this period coincided with the years of single-party rule and the violent repression of oppositional voices under the presidency of the founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and his successor, İsmet İnönü. Accordingly, the satire of the era included social realist perspectives along with Occidentalist images. One significant example of the former is *Marko Pasha*, a popular weekly satirical magazine published in the late 1940s (Cantek 2001). Referring to the fact that its writers were often sued and its content frequently censored, the cover page of *Marko Pasha* would feature half-humorous statements such as “published when not censored” or “published when writers not in custody” (Dinç 2012, 333).

The social realism of *Marko Pasha* anticipated the didactic, moral, and politicized language that dominated political satire after Turkey’s transition to a multiparty regime in 1950. Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed Cold War–related ideological divides and political unrest among politicized youth, the rapid and uneven growth of its urban centers through waves of

immigration from rural areas, and the increasing power of a developmentalist-leftist ideology in the culture industry. In the context of these developments, the popular cartoon magazines reframed the topic of the national identity crisis through the lens of class inequality in the cities. They mocked corrupt right-wing politicians and openly unjust politics, while also criticizing American imperialism (Tunc 2006), and the immigrants from the Eastern and Anatolian provinces of Turkey (Öncü 1999).

The military coup of 1980 led to the execution, arrest, and imprisonment of many political figures and youth, as well a ban on critical media, including some of the most popular cartoon magazines. Yet following Latin American models, it also marked the beginnings of the first “golden age” of neoliberalism buttressed by “an extreme version of the structural adjustment recipe of the World Bank” both while under military rule and after (Boratav 2016, 3). Pressured by both authoritarian rule and market forces, political humorists faced the dilemma of being “as ambiguous as possible, to avoid lawsuits, yet . . . explicit enough to guarantee . . . popularity among readers and reach a wider community” (Dinç 2012, 333). As a consequence, the new humor magazines that mushroomed during the post-1980 cultural environment became increasingly involved in the representation of everyday life as distant from—and even in opposition to—political issues (Apaydin 2005; Öncü 2001). They pushed the limits of taste and decorum through the use of sexual imagery and coarse language.

Many of the Gezi Park protesters belonged to the so-called “apolitical generation” (Pfannkuch 2013) who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, growing up in an era of neoliberal individualism, consumerism, and new communication technologies such as television, cell phones, and the Internet. They were considered to be tech-savvy but intellectually and ideologically impoverished, although their childhood coincided also with times of new political tensions and identity politics.⁵ For instance, the 1980s and 1990s were also marked by the rise of Islamism in urban centers, on the one hand, and, on the other, a Kurdish separatist movement that led to violent clashes between Kurdish guerrilla forces and the Turkish military in the southeast provinces.

The victory of the neo-conservative AKP in the general election of 2002 signaled a new turn in neoliberal politics and the state regulation of ethnic and religious difference in Turkey, as well as in the content of political satire. Forming Turkey’s first majority government since the 1990s, and then going on to enjoy what was to become the longest unbroken run of power since the pre-Second World War establishment period, the AKP ideologically positioned itself against the “secularist” Republican regime through a nostalgic framing of the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic model of pluralism. The first decade of AKP rule was marked by EU-led reforms in relation to minority

and women's rights (Babül 2015), neoliberal restructuring of politics and economy in articulation with Islam-oriented populism (Boratav 2016; Tuğal 2009), and a short-lived peace process with the Kurds (Yavuz and Ozcan 2006; Yeğen 2007). Yet it was the Islamist-secular struggle over the symbols of the nation that humorists and cartoonists turned their attention to most in this process.

Cartoons in daily newspapers and humor magazines took an explicit political stance on either side of the dichotomy in the context of the demise of strict secularism through the removal of the headscarf ban in official contexts and a series of trials against a group of upper-rank officers, journalists, and lawmakers who were accused of being members of a secularist clandestine organization called "the Ergenekon" (Dinç 2012; Kardaş 2012; Vanderlippe and Batur 2013).⁶ In his study of the cartoons about Ergenekon trials in both Islamist and secularist newspapers, Kardaş (2012) identifies two competing political representations: "The critics for whom the suspects are [in Necati Polat's words] democratically minded, freedom-loving, secularist intellectuals, who merely have been images of opposition in the face of an increasingly 'Islamofascist' government" and the supporters who consider the accused state elites as "dark forces bent on destroying democracy or the country's sociocultural fabric" (Kardaş 2012, 218).⁷ Vanderlippe and Batur's (2013) study of the use of the iconic images of the headscarf and the light bulb (the AKP's logo) in political cartoons of the 2000s presents a polarized view of society along similar lines.

Indeed, the secularist/Islamist binary and its historical reference points (urban/rural, modern/backward, leftist/rightist, etc.) have had concrete effects on citizens' images of themselves and their constitutive other. As shown by recent analyses of contemporary humor magazines such as *Leman*, *Uykusuz*, and *Penguen*, the new generation of cartoonists tends to present itself as "outside the system": as oppositional, anti-statist, anti-imperialist . . . antifascist, anti-media, marginal, egalitarian, populist, and humanist" as well as representing "the language of the street" (Apaydin 2005, 110; see also Dinç 2012). Yet many end up reproducing this binary regime of signification by targeting not only the government but also its supporters as their object of ridicule. While echoing a public anxiety of a particular group of people about an Islamicized Turkey, their satire does not necessarily question the excessive statism and authoritarian tendencies that have dominated both Islamist and secularist politics in Turkey.

The political aesthetics of the Gezi Park protests were not free of this binary regime of signification. Many middle-class Turkish protesters who joined the uprising after the escalation of police violence adopted a Kemalist/secularist stance. They framed their participation as one of defending Atatürk's nation from reactionary forces by explicitly invoking Turkey's

“war of liberation” in the 1920s, as in the popularized Gezi slogan, “Mustafa Kemal’in askerleriyiz” (“We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal”). Popular critical humor magazines were among the significant actors of the process, as well. Their content matter touched directly on the uprisings and the government responses to them through their already existing satirical frames and metaphors. They also postulated a physical presence in the park as part of the spectacle (Figure 4.1).

Yet the Gezi resistance included many other instances and styles of protest, both humorous and serious, that overturned and complicated binary representations of politics (Yildiz 2013). In fact, it was the heterogeneous, plural, and carnivalesque components of these instances and styles that motivated scholars and protesters to insist on the existence of a distinct “Gezi spirit” (*Gezi ruhu*), unprecedented in Turkish political culture and surprising in its effects (Eken 2014; Erensü and Karaman 2017; Inceoglu 2014; Karakayalı and Yaka 2014). In the next section, I discuss how the political agency that emerged in this process relates to previous models of political satire both in terms of its content and its form. I suggest that the shift of satire from the circumscribed realm of humor magazines and political cartoons to the multifarious street politics and online publics demands an analysis that attends not only to the effects of humor but also to its embodied and disembodied modes of circulation.



Figure 4.1 Covers of Humor Magazines being Displayed in a Makeshift “Revolution Museum” Set up between Taksim Square and Gezi Park. Photo credit: Can Altay, Istanbul 2013.

HUMOR AS RESISTANCE

In the heyday of the Gezi uprisings, a photograph circulated around social media depicting three protesters who had turned their backs to the camera, wearing funnels on their heads as makeshift helmets (Figure 4.2). These funnel helmets had handwritten “identification numbers” covered awkwardly with water-bottle labels. The meaning of this performative act was not necessarily intelligible to the general public. What was being referred to, however, was clear to those who had seen images of, or who had directly witnessed, police covering their helmets with labels during the protests in order to avoid being identified while in action. Embodying the signs of police violence in a ridiculous manner, the protesters were making a statement about the irony that the primary agents of Turkish law enforcement were acting illegally in their treatment of protesters.

Invoked in this statement was a motif associated with the works of a popular cartoonist from *Penguen* magazine, Yiğit Özgür. Özgür uses the image of the funnel on the head to represent “mad” people and invert stereotypical impressions of insanity in his drawings. These drawings often contain jokes that emphasize the out-of-place yet intelligent actions of people who are considered mentally ill according to social norms. Playing with the thin line between “madness” and “intelligence,” his cartoons often expose the incongruity of very serious moments of life as a source of amusement, power, and



Figure 4.2 Funnel Helmets. Source: <http://www.turkhaberler.net>.

laughter. The performative embodiment of the spirit of these cartoons on the part of the Gezi protesters further politicizes this incongruity: it encourages a mode of resistance that marks a denial of sanity when everything about the state becomes utterly insane.

A similar form of resistance can be identified in another example from around the same time. In a stencil placed on a wall during protests on one of the busiest streets of Taksim, then–prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan was depicted smiling and posing for protesters to take a photograph as “a memory of the resistance” (*Direnış Hatırası*) (Figure 4.3). Inviting the protesters to come under Erdoğan’s arm, the stencil mocked Erdoğan’s infamously condescending and patronizing rhetoric in his public statements about the protesters, in which he either scolded them and called them an “extremist fringe,” or denied them agency (by calling on parents to take their children off the streets and teach them how to be better citizens). In the funnel-helmet



Figure 4.3 *Direnış Hatırası*. Photo credit: Ersan Ozer, via <http://twicsy.com/i/fYHGLd>.

example, the protesters' satirical identification with oppressive power blurred the difference between absurdity and reality. The portrayal of this friendlier, patronizing act, on the other hand, located its humor in the very disjuncture between the real and its impossible replica.

In both examples, parody serves as an aesthetic of wit, bemusement, and playfulness modeled on the original (Marcus 1988, 71), yet overturning it by calling its terms into question. As the young protesters laugh—and invite others to laugh at the ridiculousness of the “real”—they also reveal the latter's objectionable nature. They “laugh,” in George Bataille's words, “in passing very abruptly . . . from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive” (1986, 90). Mimicry in these cases does more than *express* what has already been cultivated in other political domains. It fosters a vocabulary through which the protesters are able to distinguish their voice from that of the government, even when they convincingly imitate the latter. While giving what they mock credence in some way, their humorous moves also render the unexpected appearance of bodies in public impervious to labeling, categorization, and appropriation by those in power.

The strategy of mimicking the “real” to highlight its absurdity is not unique to Gezi humor. It resonates with recent forms of political satire that anthropologists have studied in both Western and non-Western contexts, focusing on the alternative spaces of expression opened up by news parody programs and acts of mocking political and economic elites (Bernal 2013; Haugerud 2013; Klumbyte 2014; Molé 2013; Webber 2013). One pioneering example is Boyer and Yurchak's (2010) comparative analysis of “stioob,” a particular genre of parody characterized by overidentification and hypernormalization of the dominant political culture in late-socialist and late-liberal contexts. Analyzing examples from late Soviet and contemporary American media such as *The Daily Show* and *The Yes Men*, Boyer and Yurchak (2010, 183) relate stioob's emergence to the monopolization of media by markets and government institutions, ideological uniformity of political news analysis, and generic normalization of political representation. While providing insight into the authoritarian underpinnings of both liberal and socialist polities, they argue that stioob-style parody does not merely express sarcasm and cynicism. Through its repetitive, imitative, and citational strategies, it exposes the incongruity between the discursive and representational field of ideology and “the real world relations that [such a field] sought to organize” (2010, 210).

Gezi humor emerged in a comparable context of increasing repression, policing, and recursive formalization of the airwave and print media to the point of severe restraints in the realm of “realist” critique. Unlike the Turkish political cartoons that I briefly reviewed above, however, it also benefited

from the alternative digital media platforms, which have proliferated since the late 1990s. Many participants of the Gezi protests, for instance, were readers of satirical news websites such as *Zaytung* (the Turkish equivalent of *The Onion*), which, like *stio*, ironically adopted the language and format of news media to emphasize the absurdity of the reality it pretended to portray. Youth in particular were accustomed to mobilizing Facebook groups, Twitter accounts, and crowd-sourced dictionaries (e.g., *Ekşi Sözlük* (Sour Dictionary)) to share jokes, funny videos, images, cartoons, and memes.⁸

Although primarily a source of entertainment, for at least a decade these venues have provided an alternative space for accessing and expressing perspectives lacking in the mainstream media and news channels. As Boyer and Yurchak (2010) suggested for contexts where news content has become significantly more monopolized and strictly regulated, social media has allowed for critical engagement not only with reality but also with the very act of representing it, that is, the realm of misrepresentation, censorship, and self-censorship. For instance, the protesters mobilized both social media and street dissent to mock the decision of local channel CNN Turk to broadcast a documentary about penguins while Taksim was inundated with tear gas on May 31, 2013. Images of penguins superimposed on the aggression in the streets (Figure 4.4) transformed an effort by the media to conceal reality into a means of exposing this concealment. By inducing laughter, the “resisting penguin” (Figure 4.5) destabilized the truth claims of “real” news reportage.



Figure 4.4 Penguins in Gezi Resistance. Source: <http://bianet.org/bianet/toplum/148061-turkiye-baska-bir-medyayi-umut-ediyor>.

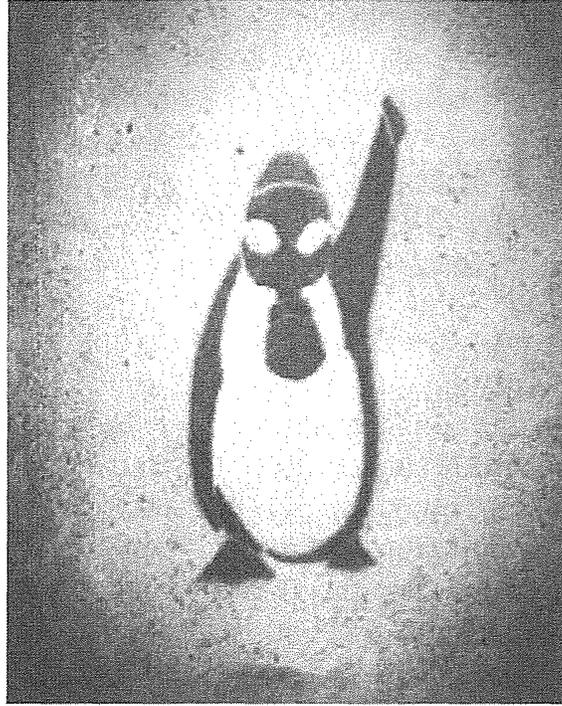


Figure 4.5 Resisting Penguin Stencil. *Source:* Via <http://birgun.net/haber/gezi-sureci-nde-penguen-yayinlamayanlara-suc-duyurusu-4507.html>.

Several scholars have focused on the deployment of social media for political activism in the post-2011 wave of global revolt, and discussed its potentials and limitations in fostering political mobilization (Anagondahalli and Khamis 2014; Juris 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2013; Webber 2013). Similar to the findings of studies on uprisings in Egypt and Greece, as well as the Occupy movement, the Gezi protesters used social media for multiple purposes: to provide logistical information; to document the police violence that often went uncovered in the news; to spread political messages to wider and diversified audiences, in order to increase national and international pressure on the state—all the while also sharing jokes about the resistance. The political influence of social media in the immediate growth and publicizing of the movement was undeniable, so much so that Erdoğan called it “the worst menace to society” in one of his early statements about the uprisings (Letsch 2013).

The digital sphere of communication poses challenges for the resistance as well. Its reliance on “communicative capitalism” (Dean 2009), as some scholars have argued in the U.S. context, has a taming and distancing effect. These new technologies tend to silence radical voices and create an illusion of action in inaction, while also enabling a culture of “oddity, mischief, and antagonism” (Phillips and Milner 2017). Aware of these challenges, some Gezi protesters invoked the distinction between online activism and street

politics as a counterpart to the well-known dichotomy in Turkish political discourses between the elites and ordinary people. For instance, responding to Erdoğan's accusation that the Gezi protesters did not represent the majority of the Turkish people, one text in graffiti read, "*Klavye başında değil, meydanlarda varız! Marjinal grup değil, orijinal halkız!*" ("We aren't at the keyboard, we are in the squares! We are not a marginal group, we are the original folk!")

This comparison between street politics and online activism is noteworthy for a number of reasons. At one level, it is an attempted inversion that targets Erdoğan's populism as its object of criticism. It invokes the culturally rooted binary models that position the Westernized, educated, secularist, modern citizens of Turkey against the traditional, authentic, Muslim people symbolically aligned with the "East," upon whose will Erdoğan's regime bases its authority. Instead of deconstructing the binary, the graffiti inverts it and expresses the protesters' claim to inhabit "the folk."⁹ Yet we could also read this graffiti as critical commentary directed at the protesters themselves. By valuing the physical presence in the streets over social-media activism, it incorporates the relatively more recent characteristics of modern lifestyles, such as the pervasive use of computers and the Internet, into the familiar and culturally circumscribed realm of signification concerning modernity and tradition.

The hierarchy of actions suggested in these comparisons also poses the materiality of resistance as the locus of its subversive potential. As the examples of the funnel-helmet and *Direnış Hatırası* (memory of the resistance) show, certain humorous performances during the Gezi events were not merely discursive, but instead operated within a realm of performativity, embodiment, and affect. This was especially the case for the marches held regularly during and in the aftermath of the protests. For instance, the Pride March of 2013, which took place shortly after the eviction of the Gezi encampments, had the highest number of participants (40,000 people) up to that point. This significant increase was accompanied by the use of various slogans, banners, and spectacles that made direct reference to the Gezi resistance and its humorous symbols—even the aforementioned penguin made a cameo appearance (Figure 4.6).

The funnel-helmet has likewise become a recurrent motif in protest marches to address the absurdities of political and economic governance in post-Gezi Turkey. Members of the nurses' union protesting the Ministry of Health's policy to increase their unpaid workload (Figure 4.7), environmentalists and inhabitants protesting against the municipality's plan to institute an incinerator facility in a district of Bursa (Figure 4.8), and university students concerned about Turkey's ongoing state of emergency since the failed coup attempt in 2016 (discussed later) all used this motif to express their



Figure 4.6 Gay Penguin' from the Pride Parade, Istanbul, 2013. Source: Via <http://cdn.listelist.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/onur-yuruyusu-2013-yagmur-altinda-yuru-yen-gay-penguen.png>.

grievances in public (Figure 4.9).¹⁰ They mobilized the purpose and style of their protest as a testimony to the departure, for both the regime and its opponents, from the normal order of politics in Turkey and the expectations that are inherent to this order.



Figure 4.7 Funnel Helmet Protest by the Nurses' Union. Source: <http://haberciniz.biz/hemsirelerden-maskeli-protesto-vurur-yuze-ifadesi-yine-mi-mesai-bitanesi-3646494.htm>.



Figure 4.8 Funnel Helmet Protest by Environmentalists and Inhabitants of Bursa. Source: Via <http://www.yenidonem.com.tr/galeri/bursa-da-hunili-protesto-232/>.

Anthropological studies of satire tend to locate humor in its discursive genre, semantic elements or textual presence. The humor in these public demonstrations, however, depend heavily on the bodily repetition, recording, and dissemination of jokes, the affective and sensorial domain of laughter

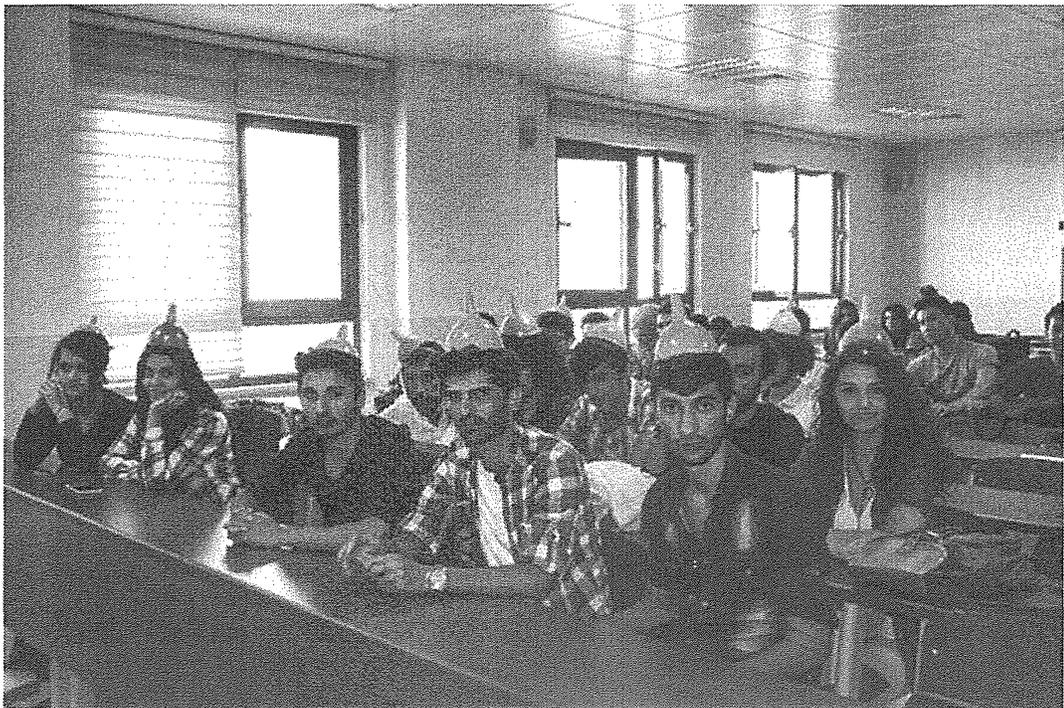


Figure 4.9 Funnel Helmet Protest by Students of Mersin University. Source: Via <https://odatv.com/sonunda-sahiden-delirdik-0211161200.html>.

they induce, and the visual culture that is produced around them. Turning the street (and politics) into a carnivalesque playground, they mark “a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). Yet this liberation has its social and political limits, which often go unaddressed in Bakhtinian analyses of the Gezi events that emphasize its alternative, participatory, material, and transgressive features (Erensü and Karaman 2017; Görkem 2015; Karakayalı and Yaka 2014).¹¹ As the previous examples from the Gezi protests attest, even in its most subversive forms, humor does not stand *outside* the serious world that it seeks to challenge and reverse, but instead emerges from, relies on, and draws its power from it. On many other occasions, it simply sustains this world through its disciplinary and differentiating mechanisms and turns into symbolic violence.

HUMOR AS SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

Much like the critics of online activism, some constituents of the Gezi resistance found the lighthearted language of the youth who were involved in the protests to be lacking direction, organization, and thus depoliticizing and pacifying. “Yes, we laugh at these jokes. They lift the spirit,” one protester told me in the tent of a Leninist organization in Gezi Park before being evicted. “But their effect is ephemeral. We need more sustainable and serious means in order to bring about change.” Feminist criticisms were concerned less with the use of humor or its temporariness than with its content. During the protests, feminist and queer groups painted over sexist and homophobic swear words and jokes with purple spray paint. “These jokes reflect how normalized sexism is in our society,” explained Nur, a self-identified anarchist feminist. “You cannot expect people who are socialized into this culture to have a sense of humor that is untouched by misogyny and patriarchy. If we want transformation, we should start from ourselves, our own language and habits.”

These two perspectives represent contradictory visions of politics, both of which challenge the unconditional celebration of humor as “impossible in ordinary life” (Bakhtin 1984, 16) and therefore subversive. Nur’s comments echo the anthropological insight that humor is deeply embedded in the gendered routines of everyday life (Carty and Musharbash 2008). It is a way of inhabiting the ordinary and a means of establishing social ties among those who share the joke at the expense of those who are subjected to it. From this perspective, what some consider ephemeral may, in fact, be the very source of continuity, an effective means of connecting the sense of extra-ordinariness or interruption of the normal to ordinary means of communication that

structure the everyday. The crucial point is not to lose sight of the fact that the everyday itself is no safe haven. It is organized around preexisting power relations and social divisions along lines of gender, class, age, and religiosity. Cyberspace is not free from these real-life boundaries either, since its users are still members of society. Far from transgressing social boundaries, social media often reflects, reproduces, and accentuates existing social divides (Daniels 2009; Nakamura 2002; Phillips and Milner 2017) as it also creates new digital divisions between those who have access to technology and those who do not (Gurel 2015).

During the Gezi protests, sexist and homophobic jokes became addressable through action and calls for self-reflexivity because such criticisms were part of an already existing struggle on the part of feminist and LGBTQ activists in Turkey. The forms of alignment and solidarity during Gezi opened up a space for these activists to have their voices heard to an even greater degree. The jokes could be problematized on the grounds that they prevented a potential solidarity between the diverse constituents of the Gezi resistance (for instance, between feminist and LGBTQ activists and male-dominated soccer fan groups). This was not so much the case for other forms of differentiation registered by Gezi humor, such as those between supporters and opponents of the resistance.

Perin Gurel (2015) has drawn attention to the persistence of gender and class hierarchies in Gezi humor by analyzing what she calls “auntie humor.” Auntie humor involves jokes that evoke the stereotypical Turkish “auntie” (*teyze*), a “semiliterate and hopelessly provincial” motherly figure preoccupied with food and domesticity (Gurel 2015, 3). The jokes appeared during the Gezi events with the participation of self-proclaimed “mothers” in protests following Erdoğan’s patronizing call that parents should take their children off the streets (see earlier). They featured images of mothers protesting in the streets (Figures 4.10 and 4.11), preparing home-made antidotes from lemon and milk, as well as satirical complaints about the “excessive pressure” mothers used while offering their home-made food to young protesters in the park (Gurel 2015, 16). In one Twitter message, a Photoshopped image of lacework was placed on a picture of AKM (Atatürk Cultural Centre), the iconic opera building in Taksim Square that was to be destroyed in the urban renewal plan. The message read, “Mothers have arrived at the resistance. Tomorrow morning when we get up, we may find AKM’s façade to have a motherly touch.”

These stereotypical representations point to incongruity as the source of laughter, shaped by the multifaceted relationship between the producers, users, and objects of humor. In this context, what connects the makers and users of humor is the fact that they share not only the joke but also the distance they establish, through the joke, between themselves and the object of



Figure 4.10 Resisting Mother. *Source:* Via <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/335133/gezi-protestolarinin-sapanli-teyze-tutuklandi>.



Figure 4.11 V for Teyzetta. *Source:* As shared on Twitter by @sarpapak81.

ridicule. In other words, humor allows its actors to construct themselves as true representatives of the resistance with the necessary means, education, and language to produce the joke, while those who are laughed at supposedly lack the cultural capital to understand them (Gurel 2015).

Following Gurel, one could suggest that auntie humor utilize the same stereotypes and binary models that have informed the satirical portrayals of AKP supporters since the early 2000s. However, whereas auntie humor drew in-group boundaries among Gezi protesters by attributing a cute, harmless naivety to its others-within, jokes about the AKP voters constructed them as an out-group, “the ultimate other.” That is why they tended to be more openly humiliating and offensive. On the one side, there were sympathetic representations of Gezi protesters who used “disproportionate intelligence” against the disproportionate police force (Gurel 2015, 6); on the other were ranged the supporters of the government whose slogans and banners during a pro-AKP rally were characterized as banal and unimaginative, becoming a source of laughter for that very reason.¹² For instance, one of the popular slogans of the 2013 Pride March was the nonsense word “*hülooğğ*,” which originated from an exclamation of excitement and support for Erdoğan expressed by a headscarf-wearing woman during the pro-AKP rally. The video-clip of this moment circulated widely in social media and commented upon as a means of exemplifying the ludicrousness and ignorance of AKP supporters. Building on the already existing frames of the secular/religious divide in Turkish political satire, the exclusionary language of humor fostered the societal polarization upon which the authority and power of the AKP government depended.

CONCLUSION

Humor during the Gezi protests engendered a language that was unexpected yet relatable, entertaining yet deeply political. Immersing the “ordinary” into the “extraordinary” moments of violence and resistance, this language compelled its users and audience—depending on the specific context in which it was enacted and the material-aesthetic forms it took—to rework existing social frameworks of political expression through mimicry, inversion, subversion, and reproduction. Far from being an ephemeral addition to realist critique, humor became politics itself: a micro-social, self-conscious, embodied site of resistance that drew people together while demarcating differences. Its context of production (e.g., street protests), modes of expression (mimicry, irony, satire), forms of mediation (cartoons, slogans, graffiti), and means of circulation (humor magazines, TV, social media) were all bound to

the existing political divides as well as the emergent techniques of neoliberal governance, subjectivity, and subjection.

Following the eviction of protesters from Gezi Park, gray paint—the color of the state—covered up the slogans on the walls of Taksim. The spirit of hope and dissent that emerged with the Gezi revolt soon was replaced by new challenges, as Erdoğan's Turkey gradually marched toward autocracy. The urban renewal plans for Gezi Park did not materialize, yet the AKP government furthered its neoliberal urban agenda as is evidenced by the ongoing pressure on other green city spaces, the destruction of forests for the construction of a third Bosphorus bridge and the new international airport, and the privatization and redevelopment of public lands in Istanbul's central and coastal locations.

The political climate has also become increasingly repressive. Following the election of Erdoğan as the twelfth president of Turkey in 2014, Turkey witnessed two general elections in 2015 (the second restoring the AKP's parliamentary majority, which it lost after the first election), the end of the peace process with the Kurds, and a referendum for a regime change from a parliamentary to presidential system that would grant the president sweeping executive powers. The referendum was held during an ongoing nationwide state of emergency, declared in response to the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016, and has since enabled a series of purges and the imprisonment of thousands of journalists, academics, politicians, and public employees on the grounds of treason and terrorism. Since the Gezi events, the AKP has also increased its control over print and airwave media, and actively mobilized the “antagonistic and mischievous Internet culture” to quell dissident voices on social media.¹³

Yet despite this crackdown, Gezi-inspired graphics and jokes have continued to prevail in other public venues that range from students' university graduation ceremonies to smaller scale rallies such as the Pride parade or the funnel-helmet protests (described earlier) to social media campaigns for elections and the referendum (Parla 2017). Along with the place-based social movements and alternative political places also empowered by Gezi's pluralist politics (Erensü and Karaman 2017, 32), these jokes attempt to articulate ways of being (and being with) which are rendered unspeakable under neoliberal capitalism and the recurrent authoritarianism of the nation state. They insist that not taking politics seriously can itself be a political act, but one that is not devoid of tension, power, and violence. As such, humorous activism testifies that politics is, in the words of Judith Butler (2012), already in the ordinary, “in the home, on the streets, in the neighborhoods, and in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square” (2012, 118).

NOTES

1. This chapter is a revised version of the article, “Down with Some Things!: Humor as Politics and Politics of Humor.” Published in *Etnofoor* in 2016 [28(1): 11—34].

2. I borrow the term “aunties” from Perin Gurel (2015) to refer to traditional domestic Turkish women.

3. The two modalities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The anarchist soccer fan group, *Çarşı*, for instance, presented a form of resistance that benefited from both humor and guerrilla-type struggle. The overwhelming use of humor in the protests, however, pointed for the most part toward a “non-violent” form of dissent undertaken by a wider array of actors.

4. For similar examples of neoliberal urbanism elsewhere, see Smith (2002) and Kanna (2012).

5. The frequency of spelling mistakes in Gezi graffiti as in the slogan “Kahrolsun *bağzı* şeyler!” are commonly addressed as an indicator of this cultural and intellectual impoverishment. Yet unlike the negative, reproving commentaries about them prior to Gezi, commentaries during the events regarded such mistakes as the very embodiment of the incongruity that humor relied on and revealed.

6. The Kurdish question is less visible in such magazines and also in scholarly discussions on humor in Turkey. For an original study of how humorous video sketches in Kurdish television channels play with and mock the stereotypical representations of Kurds as bandits, smugglers, and terrorists in Turkish mainstream media, see Çeliker (2009).

7. See Polat (2011: 4) for the quoted piece.

8. *Ekşi Sözlük* is a collaborative hypertext dictionary launched in 1999. It is one of the biggest online communities in Turkey, with over 400,000 users, and has been utilized for information-sharing on various topics ranging from politics, sports, sexuality, and science, as well as communicating personal and political views on these matters.

9. For an analysis of the relationship between secularism and populist politics in Turkey during the rule of the AKP, see Tambar (2009).

10. To underscore their visual protest, university students made the following statement: “We’ve finally gone crazy. We put an end to the rule of rationality in the face of illogical actions of the AKP regime.”

11. According to Bakhtin (1984), the carnival is on the periphery of and opposes official life. The sense of solidarity that emerges in carnivalesque contexts is not based on the unifying sameness or commonality of already formed social identities, described through Durkheim’s notion of “collective effervescence.” Instead, it celebrates the difference and heterogeneity in embodied forms and involves a temporary suspension of and departure from social norms by invoking abundance, madness, and mockery.

12. Organized at the time of the Gezi Park protests by the government, this rally took place in the officially sanctioned demonstration area in the outskirts of Istanbul and aimed to demonstrate a triumphant public appearance on the part of Erdoğan.

Many Gezi protesters referred to it as an artificial event to which people were bussed in, for which public transportation was provided free, and at which police were helpful and friendly.

13. The AKP regime formed a 6,000-strong team from its youth branches and municipal administrations in September 2013, and hired media experts in the years after for this reason. Meanwhile, another pro-AKP network of social media users—known among the resistance circles as “the AK Trolls”—started a new mission of intimidating online critics from anonymous accounts controlled by humans and bots. The International Press Institute’s report on Turkey features the critics’ assertion that “these ‘AK Trolls’ have become a de facto, online government army capable of manipulating public opinion through anonymous accounts—an army that regularly engages in harassment and intimidation” (Ellis 2015, 23).

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