

**Critical Mass Theory and Participation in Social Movements:
The Case of Gezi Protests in Turkey**
Kritik Kitle Teorisi ve Toplumsal Hareketlere Katılım:
Türkiye'de Gezi Eylemleri Örneği

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Araştırma Makalesi
Review Article

Geliş tarihi/Received:
14.01.2023

**Son revizyon teslimi/Last
revision received:**
10.03.2023

Kabul tarihi/Accepted:
23.03.2023

Yayın tarihi/Published:
31.05.2023

Atıf/Citation:

Kulak, Ö. (2023). Critical Mass Theory and Participation in Social Movements: The Case of Gezi Protests in TurkeyTaraması. *TAM Akademi Dergisi*, 2(3), 86-95. <https://doi.org/10.58239/tamde.2023.03.009.x>

DOI:

10.58239/tamde.2023.03.009.x

ABSTRACT

The meeting organized in Gezi Park on May 27th, 2013 to protest the construction of a mall in the historical park has turned into a nationwide collective movement with a gradual increase in the number of participants from different ages, classes, and political backgrounds in an era in which the young were claimed to be apolitical in comparison to the 1968 generation of Turkey. The phenomenon did not only draw the attention of the international press and news during those times but also turned into an outstanding and popular topic for academic studies. Therefore, there are several publications analyzing the Gezi Uprising and the profile, psychology, and motivation of Gezi participants. Using critical mass theory to analyze the data collected through literature review, this study examines the collective action and interdependence of the heterogeneous participant profiles with different motivations in order to understand how the Gezi protests of 2013 emerged as the largest social movement of Turkish political and social history. This study does not aim to fully answer why there are no large-scale demonstrations despite the rate of discontent in today's Turkey being much higher than that of 2013; however, critical mass theory certainly provides sufficient background to interpret participation in social movements en masse in the post-Cold War era when there is no political leader and organization leading the uprisings.

Keywords: Critical Mass, Gezi Protests, Social Movement, Collective Action

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Öz

27 Mayıs 2013'te Gezi Parkı'nda tarihi parka AVM yapılmasını protesto etmek için düzenlenen miting, gençlerin 1968 Türkiye kuşağına göre apolitik olduğunun iddia edildiği bir dönemde farklı yaş, sınıf ve siyasi görüşten katılımcı sayısının giderek artmasıyla ülke çapında kolektif bir harekete dönüştü. Bu olgu, o dönemlerde sadece uluslararası basın ve haberlerin ilgisini çekmemiş, aynı zamanda akademik çalışmalar için öne çıkan ve tercih edilen bir konu haline gelmiştir. Bu sebeple, Gezi Ayaklanması'nı ve Gezi katılımcılarının profilini, psikolojisini ve motivasyonunu inceleyen çok sayıda yayın bulunmaktadır. Literatür taraması yoluyla toplanan verileri analiz ederken Kritik Kitle teorisini kullanan bu çalışma, 2013 Gezi protestolarının Türk siyasi ve toplumsal tarihinin en büyük toplumsal hareketi olarak nasıl ortaya çıktığını anlamak için farklı motivasyonlara sahip heterojen katılımcı profillerinin kolektif eylemini ve karşılıklı bağımlılığını incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, günümüz Türkiye'sindeki hoşnutsuzluk oranının 2013'ten çok daha yüksek olmasına rağmen, neden büyük çaplı bir gösteri olmadığını tam olarak cevaplamayı amaçlamamaktadır. Ancak Kritik Kitle teorisi, Soğuk Savaş sonrası, ayaklanmalara önderlik eden bir siyasi lider ve örgütün olmadığı bir dönemde toplumsal hareketlere kitlesel katılımı yorumlamak için kesinlikle yeterli altyapıyı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kritik Kitle, Gezi Eylemleri, Toplumsal Hareket, Toplu Eylem

Introduction

On May 27th, 2013, a protest began against the construction of a shopping mall in Istanbul's historic Gezi Park. This demonstration has turned into the largest social movement in Turkish political history with the increasing participation of many citizens who were discontented not only because of the increasing negative impacts of the neoliberal economy, but also authoritarianism and intervention into the social lives by *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP), the Justice and Development Party. The Gezi Uprising, which was given wide publicity by the international press, may also be related to the Occupy movement observed in several global capital cities against strong capitalism, authoritarian political powers, privatization, corruption, urban transformation and violation of "right to the city" following the Arab Spring triggered in Tunisia in 2010; however, hosting a social movement in Taksim Square is not novel in Turkish history. While Turkey is famous for its riots, a generation accused of being apolitical finally broke their silence in the Gezi protests and sparked a fire in millions of people after long-term anger and discontent. Therefore, the Gezi uprising is worth evaluating under critical mass theory to understand the growing participation and collective action during the protests in the country. Using this theory, which explains the role of a small group of the population and their contributions to the collective action, the success of a social movement, heterogeneity, and interdependence among participants to solve the free-rider issue, this study aims to examine the factors that made the Gezi protests the largest social movement of the country. The absence of a unified movement despite the growth of discontent in the country beyond its appearance in 2013 merits deeper historical investigation and methodologies to understand why the protest movement's focus has dissipated rather than remained allied. Even if this study does not answer why there are no collective protests in Turkey recently, it will assist in understanding a successful organization of social movements today.

1. The Background

Before evaluating the participants in the Gezi protests in terms of the heterogeneity of identities, ages, and motivations under critical mass theory, it is necessary to understand the meaning

of protests in Turkey. While somewhat similar to the protests in Europe and the Middle East, several protests in the country emerged in the post-1960 process of the Cold War. As David Harvey explains, social conflict in the 1970s was a result of the increasing number of migrations from rural to urban areas. Since this was a process that started with the withdrawal of the rural population to the newly developing industrial zones as cheap labor that could not meet the costs of urbanization, this turned the cities into conflict zones (2009, as cited in Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p. 4). This was also the case in Turkey with those migrating to urban areas. Taksim Square has hosted several events, movements, and riots throughout the history for the groups varying from 1 May meetings in the 1970s to Islamists in the 1990s, and Kemalist meetings since 2007 (Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p. 3). Different from Cold War movements which were mainly based on working-class rights and revolution, today several classes and groups make their voices heard, including unemployed youth, housewives, students, and LGBTQ members from varying ages, genders, and education levels. In other words, while previous movements represented the movement of the working class against the bourgeoisie, new movements broaden to the area of the cultural sphere, environment, race, gender, ethnicity, and identity. In this vein, Gezi has also hosted several different ethnic, identity groups and political profiles. Furthermore, the motivation behind the participation today is based not only on a fair distribution of capital but also creating equal citizenship rights, which was also seen in Gezi with several discontented groups unifying under one identity “Çapulcu,” meaning marauders, a term used for protesters by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was prime minister during the protests and is also the current president in Turkey.

The reasons for the Gezi protests can be summarized as AKP’s increasing neoliberal economic policies and the negative effects of privatization, authoritarianism, suppressive politics, and construction policies on cities based on political allegiance. Also, at issue was intervention into the private lives of people such as time limits for alcohol sales, increasing rhetoric for the embeddedness of Islam and its ethics in Turkish society despite the fact that The Turkish Constitution (1982) indicates in Article 5 that democracy is one of the most important purposes of the Republic of Turkey and in Article 34 that protests are the right of citizens. Asef Bayat (2017) describes AKP with Post-Islamism, which is a desire of the state to be secular rather than being an Islamic state but also to enact religious ethics and values in social life (p. 73). This is not different from other Muslim countries attempting to promote a neoliberal economy and to justify the economic model through the press, religious orders, and associations. In this regard, even a year before Gezi, the country experienced several protests and meetings by Alevis, Kurds, workers, women and LGBTQ members against the undemocratic nature of the party (Yörük, 2014, p.421). It is also noteworthy to indicate at this point that the AKP government could not bring influential change for minority rights, multiculturalism, and stronger democracy despite the Alevi, Kurdish and Armenian Openings held in the democratization process and negotiations with the EU.

Istiklal Street and Taksim Square are the places of alternative lifestyles and elite culture with their stores, cultural venues and bars, which makes it a symbolic location for anything that is criticized by the AKP as a lifestyle (Bayat, 2017, pp. 127-128). The triggering phase of the Gezi protests was the project on the reclamation of the Topçu Barrack and plans to turn it into a shopping mall and conference hall by cutting trees in Gezi Park in Taksim. In this regard, “collaborative planning” based on involving people in local decision-making processes allows individuals to be more included in projects and policies that affect their own lives under the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions, which leads to the improvement of public services (Ökten et al., 2013, p. 47). Just after

AKP's victory in the 2002 elections, several projects were prepared for the transformation of metropolitan cities and in September 2011, the Taksim project was among them. Eventoday, everyone who is politically close to the government gets their share of the profit from city transformation and construction projects. NGOs, associations and foundations set the Taksim platform and applied to Istanbul Protection Board No. 1 regarding the protection of Gezi Park (Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p. 10). Despite the decision by Istanbul Administrative Court No. 6 and the Cultural and Natural Heritage Preservation Board, the reconstruction of the Topçu Barrack was going to be initiated under the Taksim Pedestrianization Project in 2013. The critics of the Taksim Square and Gezi Park plans demanded the correct operation of the planning institution and legal processes be opened to discussion before and after the resistance. The administration's aversion, without any effort to negotiate or to reduce the quality of the discussions to polemics in the media, has been an attitude that has closed the channels of participation and forced the citizens of the city into civil resistance (Ökten et al., 2013, p. 49). In the end, the meeting starting with an interest group consisting of people who passively sat under trees and read books to prevent the project turned into the unification and collective action of different interest groups under the title *Gezici* in not only metropolitan cities but also small towns across Turkey.

2. Critical Mass Theory and Gezi Participants

"Critical mass" is a term used to indicate the minimum amount or a particular point for an action, reaction, or result. Critical mass theory is used not only in the positive sciences such as physics and chemistry but also in the social sciences and humanities, including economics where its use is calculating contribution and surplus distribution at the microeconomics level. Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver, the leading names of theorizing social action, draw attention to the effects of social preferences in collective action and gain, but they also do not deny their consistency with the microeconomic approach since the equations contain these subjective preferences (Marwell & Oliver, 1993, p. 7). However, this study does not offer empirical formulas used to calculate gains, its allocation among investors and "free riders." Rather, it will conceptually focus on subjective factors leading to participation in social movements of today such as different motivations and different perceptions of "common good," solidarity and interdependence in the movement, and different identity profiles rather than the exclusively class-based organization of the past.

While the term "critical mass" originated in nuclear physics to refer to the minimum amount of fissile material for a nuclear chain reaction, the term has diffused into popular culture and social science as a certain number of people working together for change (Oliver, 2013, p. 285). When the term "critical mass" is used for theorizing collective action and social movements, it refers to the critical number of participants in a social movement who attempt to achieve a particular aim by collective action. Critical mass theory in social movements is a "formal theory about how interdependent decisions accumulate into collective action..." (Oliver, 2013, p. 285). "Collective action," in this sense, means "... any and all activity aimed at the provision of a collective good..." (Marwell & Oliver, 1993, p. 4).

Critical mass theory advocates the idea that the choice of a small segment of the population makes large contributions to the collective action while the majority does little or nothing (Oliver et al., 1985, p.524). One issue is always more important for someone than the others. For example, the demand for clean air is more important for those with health issues. As indicated, there were several interest groups such as Alevi, Kurds, or trade unions organizing their meetings separately before Gezi.

Similarly, the very beginning of Gezi has been constituted by a small activist group that actually follows the projects of government for environmental reasons rather than only being anti-current government as a political identity.

The Oliver-Marwell model assumes that there is a direct proportion between the size of the contributing groups and their resulting gain since collective action provides more than one can accomplish alone (Macy, 1990, p. 814). Thus, “heterogeneity” is a major factor for the success of collective action (Oliver et al., 1985, p. 524). In this regard, the bandwagon effect based on the participation of other groups one by one has also been observed in the Gezi protests. New social movements are already inconsistent due to their flexible organizational structure with no decision-making leader or groups (Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p.16). When groups are heterogeneous in terms of interests, the effects of networking groups on collective action are harder to understand (Marwell et al., 1988, p. 520). However, even if the government did not resign in the end, the Gezi protests were successful in proving that heterogeneous groups are capable of uniting under a common goal despite differing individual concerns. In this sense, they proved to the world that the citizens of the Turkish Republic were unsatisfied with the policies of the AKP government who had good relations with the EU at this time.

Different groups became united during the Gezi protests, including Armenians, Kurds, Turkish nationalists, anti-capitalist Muslims, LGBTQ community, Beşiktaş Football Team Fans-Çarşı, Union of Chamber of Turkish Engineers and Architects-TMMOB, Platform to Stop Femicides and trade unions. Even those with different political views from the Republican People’s Party to the Nationalist Movement Party participated despite the fact that the media reflected it as a fight for democracy between the main secularist opposition party and Islamists. It was observed that some participants defined their political views as “humanist” or “liberal,” while other participants either said that they did not have a political view or defined their political identities as “center-right” and “communist” (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 43). According to the research by Sallan Gül et al. (2015), the description of triggering events were based on not only the negative effects of neoliberal policies, but also right to the city and common life areas, pressure, intervention and rhetoric of non-democratic politicians on social values such as criticizing mini skirts, abortion and alcohol consumption (p. 15). The narratives of interviewees also showed that the environmental and urban issues transformed into general discontent about AKP policies and ideologies (Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p. 16). Thanks to technology as an organizational tool for social movement, the Gezi protests grew to include a plethora of identities with different motivations. However, as indicated, the interest level towards an issue may vary among identities. For example, while libertarians and secularists have similar concerns about the environment, democracy, and women's rights, the former is more concerned about minority rights, including those of both the ethnic and LGBTQ communities. According to Gülseli Baysu (2017), the primary difference between the two groups stems from the secularists’ perception of religious and ethnic threats. Observations of the actions of both groups showed their support of the protests and their active participation in them as well as their use of social media. However, conservatives, as the group least likely to support the protests, most often did not feel value-based concerns. They also had less empathy for other protest-based concerns, namely police brutality, and the authoritarian attitude of the government; therefore, social media was more widely used as a protest space for them (Baysu, 2017, p. 85). Consequently, the Gezi protests were more significant for those who felt the pressure of

the intervention of the state into their social lives, rather than anti-capitalist Islamists who still had some ties to the government.

The heterodoxy in the Gezi protests was observed not only in regard to the ideologies, motivations and political views of the participants, but also their differing ages. Besides those who had participated in previous protests, many adolescents also attended to demonstrate their opposition to the current political order for the first time. Fifty four percent of the Gezi participants indicated that they had never attended any protests before; seventy percent also declared their non-affiliation with any particular political party (Baysu, 2017, p. 79). Emre Erdoğan (2015) also described the Gezi protests as a sizeable event in Turkish political history since only ten percent of participants indicated that they had ever attended protests, boycotts, or any other political participation except for voting (p. 31). Furthermore, the majority of the participants consisted of those in their 20s and middle class professionals in their 30s (Sallan Gül, 2015, p. 17). There are also studies showing that the education level of citizens is the most influential determinant of political participation; with more education, self-confidence increases resulting in more participation in politics (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 34). In this regard, the presence of the middle class in the protests can be explained through demands and expectations shaped by education level.

As Marwell et al. (1988) indicate, the strong density of "social ties" in a group increases the chance of collective action (p. 502). In the case of the Gezi protests, participants united under the identity of "çapulcu" with the hope that they could effect change. The photo of three men side by side with the different soccer team jerseys of famous rivals, Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray, is not the only symbolic image from the protests (Viynis, 2014, 0:10). Three different hand gestures as the symbol of different political ideologies are depicted in another image: the victory sign of social democrats, the wolf figure of Turkist ultranationalism, and the fist of the communists (Akpınar, 2016, 0:23). These prove that different identities are united under one umbrella as "Gezici/Çapulcu." Most analyses of collective action agree that overcoming the free-rider problem requires organizing potential contributors, thus making their decisions "interdependent" (Marwell et al., 1988, p. 502). Therefore, witnessing police violence in media ended with people being bound to those who were actually exposed to violence and who they began to see as their brothers. According to Emre Erdoğan (2015), who questioned the political psychology and narratives behind the participants through "Grounded Theory," for young people, those who faced the unjustified violence of the police were also their peers, so it was easy to identify with them. When the "group" became "part of me," the anger became much greater (pp. 33-46). This can be explained with Klandermans's emphasis on emotions and their role to accelerate and amplify motivation to participate in political protests: The most important emotion discussed is anger; and the greater the degree of resentment individuals feel for the victimization of their group, the greater their motivation to participate (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 40). In this regard, anger provokes unity and interdependence.

The Gezi protests were the collective result of individual behavior, and to understand this, it is necessary to examine the mechanisms behind individual decisions to participate. Relative poverty, feelings of competence in regards to effecting change, identity politics, emotions, ideologies, and victimization, are the main factors that push individuals to participate in protests, but no factor is independent of the others. Compared to the Cold War era, people today do not necessarily need to be activists or members of a particular social identity, rather, the common ground of discontent brings people together. As Bülent Eken (2014) indicates, the generation described as selfish, anti-intellectual,

consumerist, and apolitical also proved the opposite by revolting against these attributes (p. 431). Erdoğan (2015) uses the term “political competence” to explain the alienation of participants from politics for a long period. “Political competence” means group competence, the belief of individuals that their group can influence politics; however, the perception that politics is useless and corrupt tends to inspire low political competence when it is accompanied with distrust of the government (p. 44). When individuals believe that their political efforts will relieve their grievances, they have a higher sense of political competence and thus become more inclined to participate in political protests (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 39). There is a widespread agreement that the most important reason behind the unforeseen growth of the Gezi protests is the violence perpetrated by the police against the demonstrators. In fact, according to the research held by Konda Research Agency, 49,1 percent of participants attended after seeing the police violence (Konda, 2014, as cited in Sallan Gül et al., 2015, p.20). These events aroused a sense of injustice among young people. One of the interviews among the participants indicated that “...even just because of human feelings, a lot of people just wondered how the police could do such a thing to a person” (Erdoğan, 2015, pp. 45-46). Another participant stated that they were horrified due to the scenes of police blatantly dragging girls by their hair and wanted to join the protests no matter what happened (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 46). The impression that the group has the power to redress their grievances through their political actions is a major factor that pushes individuals to participate in protests.

Several people lost their lives during the protests and there were many more arrests of students and others resulting in criminal records. The police also engaged in other forms of extreme violence during the protests. Not only did they mistreat those who were arrested, but they also violently woke people who were staying in tents to occupy the public area at all times, in order to burn the tents. Therefore, both before and after, political concerns about equality, democracy, and human rights were also important factors for the growing protests even beside economic concerns like the right to the city, anti-neoliberalism or resentment at its impacts. However, in order to answer why people would leave their warm sofas and go to squares for the collective good, it is necessary to return to critical mass theory. According to critical mass theory, for an individual facing a situation and attempting to make a rational decision, the first question they ask is how much of a return can be expected from some specified level of contribution (Oliver et al., 1985, p. 525). When considering cost-calculation in a social movement, participants must accept that the cost might be their lives, exposure to police brutality, or criminal registration. A report by the Human Rights Association indicated that five people were killed, more than eight thousand injured, and three thousand were detained during the Gezi protests (Eken, 2014, p. 427). The European Parliament Resolution on the Situation in Turkey (2013) also refers to the direct shooting of tear gas canisters and plastic bullets at the protesters and the serious injury they caused. Direct release of pressurized water by cannon, direct shooting of plastic bullets and tear gas canisters at people, which were extremely overused, can also be seen in the symbolic footages of the protest (Akpınar, 2016).

However, if people thought of only their own lives, there would be no collective action. Oliver et al.(1985) indicate that individuals reach a decision after their evaluation of whether or not their contribution will be immediately profitable to them (p. 533). Marwell and Oliver (1988, as cited in Macy, 1990) focuses on “rational choice” assumption in critical mass theory, which means that actors seek to “spend wisely” regarding estimates of “cost-effectiveness;” however, full rationality cannot be accepted by actors all the time; and, they may not have the analytic skill to calculate the investment

to the public good (p. 810). The assumption that individuals prefer isolation is usually wrong; instead, participation in collective action is rational for individuals as a result of interdependence (Marwell et al., 1988, p. 504). When independent actors are not in a network, they tend to take the role in collective action only when some "social resolution" possibilities are seen (Marwell et al., 1988, p. 509). Therefore, the participation by anti-capitalist Muslims is not surprising even though it was limited and it can be explained by "free riding" thanks to the initial contributions of the most interested groups. Additionally, some young people participated not only after witnessing what happened to their peers but also because the protests were turning into a considerable event with growing participation, which they hoped to join themselves. One of the previous participants who was interviewed in Emre Erdoğan's research (2015) stated that "I always wondered if the government would take a step back, but as the days passed, my hope dwindled. But when events happened all over the country, the sense of unity became much more dominant. I felt like I had thousands of brothers" (p. 47). Another interviewee said "Everyone realized that they could do something. I can do something too, and I should be there too. Even if I didn't do anything, passive or active, I ultimately had to make a physical contribution to that crowd" (Erdoğan, 2015, p. 48). These narratives prove that the growth of the event led to new participants in the protests. Furthermore, the participation in the Gezi protests had increased day by day with the people who used to prefer only indirect participation such as hanging the Turkish flag on the balcony, honking car horns, posting on social media, or "cacerolazo" (making noise with pans and pots). Sixty nine percent of participants indicated that they participated in the protests after finding out about them on social media (Baysu, 2017, p. 81).

According to Oliver et al. (1985), people are most likely to take action for the causes they believe are worth it, and it is possible that others expect them to do so (p. 541). As Charles Kurzman (2005) indicates, critical mass theory expects "free riders" or non-participants to attend in cases of increasing expectation of victory and safety due to crowd size (p.132). Upper-middle-class neighborhoods are quicker and more effective at requesting resolution regarding issues with municipality services; it can be seen afterward that many other residents of the neighborhood with less interest in the issues and resources to devote to neighborhood protection will then start to free ride (Oliver et al., 1985, p. 540). Similarly, Gezi had started with the gathering of a small group in Gezi Park on 27th May and participation grew day by day with people feeling safe in the crowd after realizing that it was no longer a small gathering of particular interest groups but a critical historical event.

In critical mass theory, the "free rider" concept is an issue because in the end, people who do nothing can also benefit from surplus. This can be illustrated by multiple people calling municipality services when the lights go out or when there is a pothole (Oliver et al., 1985, p. 541). However, social movements and gain are different from economic surplus and its distribution. "Free riders" are the issue in the process of social movements since the passivity of less interested groups may create the opinion that there are few people who are discontented by particular issues and the majority is satisfied with the status quo. Eventually, the Gezi uprising demonstrated the bandwagoning of several different identities, which does not constitute a surplus share issue in social movements. In fact, it shows exactly the opposite in terms of proving country-wide dissatisfaction of citizens.

Conclusion

The Gezi uprising is the moment when millions of people broke their silence in 2013 regarding their ongoing discontent about a government that came to power in 2002. Even if there were small-scale gatherings in 2021 against increasing femicide and a drastic decrease in the value of the Turkish lira against the American dollar, there had not been a protest in the size of Gezi. The reason for this silence necessitates deeper research, but this study shows that critical mass theory is relevant in examining how a protest that began in a park with a small group became the largest social movement in Turkish history. This theory in conjunction with solidarity of different identities and interest groups resulting in the ties of common identity, increasing participation and the solving of the free-rider issue demonstrates how social movements today emerge in the presence of individual demands, varying identities and discontent despite the absence of strong polarization among ideologies, classes, organizations and leaders representing larger groups rather than individuals in the post-Cold War era. In the case of Gezi, the main motivation that brought the participants against the government and beyond the protection of the trees in the park was the perception that police action was unfair and unjust. Especially when the participants realized that those who have been treated unlawfully were people similar to them, their feelings of victimization and anger increased. Therefore, the common motivation for the Gezi participants was based on the continuation of protests and government which refused to resign in a country that was supposed to be democratic. Just after the early 2010s' "democratic" openings by the AKP in the EU harmonization process, European countries declared the AKP as the source of "democratization" due to the party's weakening of military power and their legalization of the headscarf in governmental public spaces. However, the Gezi protests successfully made people's voices heard and proved to the world that the citizens of the Turkish Republic were not happy, even if the protests did not lead to the falling of the government. In the end, many people with different motivations became one under the "Gezici" title proudly.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Hale Yılmaz, and my colleague and friend, Lindsey Craig, for their support and valuable contributions to my article.

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