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Sinan Erensü, Ozan Karaman

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# THE WORK OF A FEW TREES: GEZI, POLITICS AND SPACE

*Sinan Erensü, Ozan Karaman*

## Abstract

In June 2013, Istanbul and many cities across Turkey became stages of massive demonstrations and occupations, which were sparked by a conflict over Gezi Park in central Istanbul. For many, the ‘park issue’ was simply the last straw, and it led to unprecedented revolt, reflecting a huge number of grievances against the government for some, while for others it emphasized the impoverishing consequences of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP’s) urban policies. Instead of disentangling causes and effects, we think that a productive way of approaching the oppositional surge that erupted in Gezi Park is through the political work that space does in the context of the increasing prominence of speculation-driven and authoritarian interventions in urban spaces. Gezi, as an event, not only disrupted the routinized scripts of an increasingly autocratic government and defied the presumed consensus over real-estate and infrastructure-led economic growth policies, but also helped to articulate a series of political agendas across the urban–rural continuum that came before it. Even after the occupation, the Gezi spirit continued to politicize space through various de-localizations. By elaborating on a particular phrase popularized during Gezi, namely *yaşam alanı* (life space), the article discusses how the riot’s political impact deepened and expanded not only through defending a space but also by creating new ones, both materially and conceptually.

## 1. Introduction

*The issue is not just Gezi Park my friend, haven't you got it already?  
Come and join us #resistgezipark  
@memetalialabora, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

Towards midnight on 27 May 2013 an email was circulated within the activist circles of Istanbul which informed recipients of the arrival of heavy construction vehicles in Taksim Square to start the anticipated demolition of Gezi Park, one of the few remaining green spaces in central Istanbul. That night, a handful of activists rushed to the park; they successfully prevented a dozen trees from being cut down, forced the construction vehicles to retreat and set up a small resistance encampment to defend the park. The next day, the construction vehicles made another attempt, this time backed by police. They were met with increasing resistance. In the days that followed, the spiral of police violence and ever-growing number of protesters escalated into around-the-clock street clashes that continued until the park and the entire Taksim Square were occupied by hundreds of thousands of protesters by midday on 1 June 2013. In the space of four days what had started as a modest sit-in protest had turned into a fully fledged anti-government revolt in which myriad grievances against authoritarianism, discrimination and the increasing commodification of common spaces under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) were voiced by different segments of society. Barricades were constructed around the square to block possible police attacks (see Figure 1). 1 June marked the first day of what was later dubbed

the ‘Gezi Commune’. Until the major police raid of 15 June, Gezi Park, Taksim Square and its surroundings, in the very heart of Istanbul, were completely devoid of state apparatus and were turned into a carnivalesque stage for expressing and encountering diverse objections against the government and alternative political imaginaries (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, anti-government protests, answered by excessive police force, spread to other cities. According to a report by the Ministry of Interior over 2.5 million people actively participated in 5,000 demonstrations held across 79 out of the country’s 81 provinces over the first 20 days of the events (Milliyet, 2013). Nine civilians were killed and at least 8,000 were heavily injured. More than 3,000 protestors were arrested and twelve lost an eye to tear gas capsules (Amnesty International, 2013). The Gezi revolt had an impact far beyond June 2013, and what is referred to as the ‘Gezi spirit’ continues to mobilize the opposition and influence Turkey’s cultural scenery and political debate.

There have been various explanations for the unexpected outburst that originated in Gezi Park and swept through most of Turkey throughout the summer of 2013. For many, the ‘park issue’ was the last straw; it led to unprecedented revolt, reflecting a huge number of grievances against an increasingly oppressive government. It was an ‘uprising for dignity’ (Insel, 2013), a refusal of the upcoming middle classes ‘to live under the authoritarian guidance of a self-appointed father of the country’ (Keyder, 2013), and a protectionist response of culturally rich but politically poor urban middle classes (Wacquant, 2014). Others emphasized the impoverishing consequences of the AKP’s urban policies. The revolt represented a popular demand for the right to the city for all (Kuymulu, 2013; Tonak, 2013), and was a reaction to the AKP’s urban transformation agenda and its neoliberal interventions in public spaces (Tuğal, 2013; see also Sonmez, 2013a).

In many ways, the Gezi revolt is all of the above, yet not reducible to any single one of them. This is perhaps why the simple tweet from the early days of the uprising—quoted above—remains the second most retweeted Turkish content on Twitter (Kaplan, 2013), as it captures the openness of the revolt so well. What makes a straightforward analysis of an overdetermined event such as Gezi tricky is the methodological impossibility of disentangling cause from effect. To grasp the openness and impact of Gezi as a political event we propose to focus on its diverse spatialities and on the political work that space does. Here we highlight three interrelated aspects.

The first aspect pertains to the political economy of space. Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 15), anticipating the complete urbanization of the world, famously argued that urban reality cannot be ‘defined as a “superstructure” ... the simple result of growth and productive forces’, as it ‘becomes a productive force’ itself. More recently, Hardt and Negri (2009: 250) argued that ‘the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class’. Turkey has become a prime example of an economy in which construction, real estate and infrastructure are major means of value extraction and accumulation (cf. Harvey, 2012; 2014), not only in the metropolises, but extending to larger sociospatial relations in the urban–rural continuum. The commercial redevelopment of the most centrally located public park in Turkey rendered visible in highly condensed form the uncompromising and condescending tone of speculation driven intervention in space under AKP rule.

The second is the political role of space in enabling the demonstration of dissensus. A number of critical theorists working with and within post-foundationalism have elaborated on a distinction between politics and the political, which has become highly relevant in the context of recent

popular uprisings and occupations across the world (Dikeç, 2005; 2012; Badiou, 2012; Žižek, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2014). While politics refers to the technical and procedural aspects of government and policymaking, *the political* recuperates politics as a terrain of dissensus, capable of disrupting the taken-for-granted ordering of things (Dikeç, 2005; 2012; 2013a) to achieve more egalitarian ways of ‘being-in-common’ (Nancy, 1991).<sup>1</sup> While the distinction between politics and the political could be criticized for its formalism (Featherstone and Korf, 2012), it is nonetheless useful for making sense of the spatialities of a ruptural event such as the Gezi revolt. Politics operates through partitionings of and distributions in space; thus, it can be disrupted through acting on space (Rancière, 1999; 2001). Yet when the political erupts in and through space, it does not only disrupt spatial partitions but also creates conceptual spaces (Dikeç, 2012) in which new political beginnings and alternatives can be imagined and ‘de-localized’ (Badiou, 2012: 95). During the two weeks of clashes and occupation, Gezi Park and its surroundings became ‘political’, that is, ‘an integral element of the interruption of the “natural” (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order’ (Dikeç, 2005: 172, based on Rancière). Gezi Park enabled and accommodated a profound moment of ‘stasis’ (Dikeç, 2013b), a temporary halting of the AKP’s authoritarian-neoliberal-Islamist machinery<sup>2</sup>.

The third aspect relates to spatiality of political imaginaries. Gezi’s political momentum cannot be explained solely on the basis of its disruption of dominant spatiopolitical arrangements. Gezi also enabled new political imaginaries that articulated and connected various political and grassroots mobilizations across the urban–rural continuum that came before it and continued to politicize space through its various delocalizations. Here we emphasize the notion of *yaşam alanı* (life space)—a phrase that has been widely invoked by activist groups before, during and after the Gezi revolt—as a prominent instance of ‘space as a mode of political thinking’ (Dikeç, 2012). As an explicitly spatial imaginary, this notion resonated with adherents of a variety of social and political causes (such as the Kurdish political movement), helping them articulate their demand for rights (Erensü, 2015).

Undeniably, there exists a vast literature that is concerned with the relevance of space for contentious politics and place-based movements. Castell’s seminal *City and the Grassroots* (1983) continues to be inspiring today. Especially in the post-1980s context of an ascendant neoliberal mainstream (Mayer, 2013), various mobilizations against privatization of common urban spaces, gentrification, speculation-driven urban redevelopment, austerity policies, discrimination and marginalization have been the subjects of research and debates. Apart from work on ‘urban’ social movements, quite a few fruitful theoretical interventions have emphasized the relevance of geographical categories (place, space, scale and networks) for understanding the practices and strategies of social movements as well as the dynamics of contentious politics in general (Sewell, 2001; Martin and Miller, 2003; Leitner et al., 2008; Nicholls, 2009). While our article is inspired by and benefits from these spatially informed theoretical interventions, we are sceptical of the

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<sup>1</sup> On different interpretations of the distinction between politics and the political in the works of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jean Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, see Marchart (2007) and Dikeç (2005; 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Here, we take neoliberalism beyond a set of policy prescriptions that typically involve privatization of public assets, shrinking of the welfare state and economic deregulation, to refer to a ‘political rationality’ seeking to render dominant the market logic in all realms of social exchange (Brown, 2006; see Karaman, 2013c for a more detailed discussion).

relevance of the social movements framework for tackling the radical indeterminacy, openness and political potential of a ruptural event such as Gezi, as it maintains a focus on organized modes of mobilizations in mutations and interactions with formal political institutions.

The discussion that follows will be referring to a few activist networks that could be understood as (urban) social movements. Many of these were at the forefront of the Gezi revolt and took on some significant leadership roles, bringing in their expertise and action repertoires. Moreover, in various representations of Gezi—in the mainstream media and in journalistic accounts—the agendas of these pre-existing social movements (most notably environmentalists, and right-to-the-city activists) provided much-sought context and content. Nonetheless, unlike Spain, where, as Flesher Fominaya (2015) claims, there are clear antecedents to the 15-M/Indignados and pre-existing autonomous social movement traditions, the Gezi event—in its scope and substance—stands out as a novelty in the Turkish context. Thus we abstain from establishing any direct causal links between the leadership of social movements and an overdetermined event such as the Gezi revolt.<sup>3</sup> We believe that grappling with the political, as it manifested itself in the global protests shaking the world from 2011 onwards, means taking the spatialities of the revolts as well as their history and sociology seriously. In what follows we trace how, in the absence of an organizational core and master plan, spatial practices lent the revolt coherence, thus enabling new political articulations. Kaika and Karaliotas (2016) provide an insightful analysis of the unfolding of the political in and through the spaces of Syntagma Square. We aim to further extend such a spatial sensitivity by examining how Gezi articulated the political across the urban–rural continuum, and by highlighting the significance of the spatiality of political thinking through the notion of *yaşam alanı* (life space).

The article begins with a discussion of the political economy of space production under AKP rule and the contradictions thereof. The second section provides an overview of various mobilization attempts against the AKP’s interventions in space both in urban—focusing on Istanbul—and rural contexts prior to the Gezi revolt. The third section departs from the experience of the Commune to elaborate on the notion of *yaşam alanı*. In the final section we discuss the aftermath of Gezi, focusing primarily on the various ways in which the Gezi spirit continued to articulate the political through various de-and re-localizations across space.

The article draws on our respective work on and ongoing engagement with spatial politics in Turkey. Since 2010, Erensü has been studying new energy landscapes along the Turkish Black Sea coast, focusing particularly on popular mobilizations against hydropower infrastructures. Karaman undertook focused fieldwork in Istanbul between 2007 and 2009 to study neoliberal urbanism, urban renewal and its attendant conflicts, and has conducted additional fieldwork since. Our field methods included documentary analysis, interviews with government officials, activists and local residents, as well as participant observation within communities and groups contesting

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, shortly before Gezi, the state of social movements in Turkey in general—especially that of environmentalist and urban-based networks—was far from promising. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that it was the Gezi revolt itself that gave new life to many social movements. According to a survey conducted in Gezi Park during its occupation, 78.9% of respondents were not members of any political party or civic association, and 93.6% stated that they were in the park as regular citizens, not as representatives of any group, platform or organization (KONDA, 2014). Given the diversity of and interrelation between grievances and the largely uncoordinated nature of the mass mobilization, it is difficult speak of a coherent ‘Gezi movement’ with clear political goals.

project implementations. While Erensü participated in the Gezi resistance throughout the summer of 2013, Karaman was able to observe park assemblies in July. In total, we conducted fifteen unstructured interviews with participants of the Gezi Commune and with a number of activists, and carried out participant observation in park assemblies in the aftermath of the Gezi occupation.

## 2. Space, Growth and Development: AKP economics

*“Citizens, of course, will purchase land for investment; rent<sup>4</sup> will be created. The country cannot develop without the creation of rent, without the private sector making money. Have a look at the broadcasting of CNN or BBC... you will see [images of] rent and power in the [skyline] background. We shall be powerful too!”<sup>5</sup>*

Erdoğan Bayraktar,  
Minister of Environment and Forestry  
Sep 2, 2013

The AKP was founded in 2001 in the immediate aftermath of a major economic crisis. The 2001 crisis, triggered by a sudden US \$20 billion outflow of foreign capital, resulted in the bankruptcy of several major banks, a significant fall in employment rate, and a 6% decline in GDP (Akyüz and Boratav, 2003). Voters in the 2002 general elections, distressed by the crumbling economy, swept existing major parties out of the political arena and handed the AKP a landslide victory. The lesson that the AKP learnt from the 2001 crisis was that political stability (understood as one-party rule), tight fiscal policy and a disciplined banking system, accompanied by an economic climate welcoming to foreign capital inflow, are important. Foreign capital inflow was facilitated by (1) a monetary policy yielding high real interest rates (particularly until the global financial crisis in 2008); (2) strict adherence to structural adjustment and privatization; and (3) the availability of liquidity in international markets (Yeldan, 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Sönmez, 2013a; 2013b; Pamuk, 2014: 289). As a result, between 2003 and 2012, foreign capital inflow into Turkey amounted to US \$400 billion, a huge increase compared to the preceding 22 years (1980–2002), during which open-market policies were in place and foreign capital inflow had totalled a mere US \$35 billion (Sönmez, 2013b: 18).

The foreign-capital rush took different forms, including investment in government funds, short-term deals on the stock exchange, buyouts of private banks and public enterprises and, most significantly, loans to the private sector. In the first five years of AKP rule, the Turkish economy grew by an impressive 7% annually. Despite a sharp contraction in 2008 and 2009, the average growth rate between 2003 and 2013 was 5.1%. Until recently, foreign news services praised the economic success of the AKP and promoted Turkey as a safe bet for international investors.

However, the AKP’s economic growth model has structural vulnerabilities that pose significant risks. First of all, reliance on the flow of foreign hot money increased debt levels by creating a substantial current-account deficit (Sönmez, 2013b: 19). As the economy grew, the ratio of the current-account deficit to national income grew too. This created a significant vulnerability,

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<sup>4</sup> Rent (rant in Turkish) commonly denotes income through unproductive and often speculative means.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Erdoğan Bayraktar on government-led urban speculation accusations (Par, 2013).

particularly for the private sector, as it holds two thirds of the country's foreign debt (ibid.). Secondly, owing to the demand for high and fast returns on foreign capital inflows, the growth has been speculation-based in nature (Yeldan, 2013b). The mostly short-term inflows have not resulted in capital formation (that is, they have not resulted in low savings rates) but have mainly stimulated consumption (Boratav, 2013; Adaman et al., 2014).

Under these volatile conditions, construction and real estate emerged as major destinations for foreign capital inflows and stimulated internal demand.<sup>6</sup> Turkey has been experiencing a construction boom since the early 2000s. The total area for which building permits were issued amounted to 45, 123, 176 and 219 million square metres for the years 2003, 2006, 2010 and 2014, respectively (TUIK, 2015). Between 2004 and 2013, loan amounts to the construction sector increased more than eighteenfold, from 4.6 billion to 85 billion, and the percentage of loans to the construction sector to total loans increased from 4.7% to 7% (Yalınkılıç, 2014).

The surging role of construction in Turkish economy has political as well as economical motives. One remarkable success of the AKP has been its ability to present its real estate and construction-led growth model as the benchmark of development (and modernity). To be fair, a developmentalist vision has historically been a dominant leitmotif in Turkish politics (Keyder, 1997; Adaman and Arsel, 2005; Harris, 2008), irrespective of political inclination (Akbulut and Adaman, 2013). Conservative tradition, which the AKP claims lineage to, in particular, associates politics with service (hizmet) and service with construction (Bora, 2011). The AKP elevated this developmentalist tradition to the next level (Akbulut and Adaman, 2013) not only by securing consent through grand projects, but also by marketing the idea that anyone could partake and earn big in this enterprise (the epigraph at the beginning of this section attests to this). Many construction projects, and urban transformation in particular, have incorporated ordinary citizens into their layers of speculative growth by turning small-scale land and homeowners into self-made entrepreneurs (on speculative urbanism, see Goldman, 2011).

Development as a discursive tool was liberally used as a shield against critiques. In confronting Gezi, it is no coincidence that Erdoğan highlighted AKP's growth success and presented Gezi activists as "so-called environmentalists... who do not want Turkey to grow, to be prosperous and powerful".<sup>7</sup> In the next section we provide an overview of how spatial politics unfolded in the past decade, on both urban and rural grounds, paying special attention to overlaps and connections between the two.

### **3. Under-Construction: Transforming the Urban and Beyond**

Like other aspiring global cities, Istanbul has over the past decades been imagined by its administrators as a major player in the world economy. Since the early 1980s, successive administrations have pursued policies to relocate Istanbul's manufacturing industries to its

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<sup>6</sup> This was not surprising given that construction has been historically the safest area of investments for emerging markets (Balaban, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> The full text of the Prime Minister's speech is available at: <https://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/basbakanerdoganin-milli-iradeye-saygi-ankara-mitinginde-yaptigi-konusmanin/46017#1> (accessed 6 June 2014).

hinterland (Doğruel and Doğruel, 2010) and to market Istanbul as a desirable destination for business and tourism. Urban development has increasingly acquired a speculative character and become a major means of wealth accumulation.

The AKP era is characterized by an upscaling of ambitions and an expansion in the scope of interventions under an increasingly centralized governance regime bearing the imprint of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998, prime minister from 2003 to 2014, and president since August 2014. Some recently launched or announced large-scale projects include the Third Bosphorus Bridge with its connecting highways (see Figure 3), a new international airport (publicized as the world’s largest airport), and an artificial canal (Kanal Istanbul) that will cut through Istanbul’s European peninsula to create an alternative naval passage to the Bosphorus<sup>8</sup>, and create a new axis for future urban development. Previous administrations’ interventions had focused largely on infrastructural projects (mostly roadworks), prestige projects in central locations and high-end office and residential developments in prime locations (particularly along the Bosphorus) (see Ekinici, 1994). The AKP administration also turned its gaze to informally developed territories in the metropolitan peripheries, and to decaying neighbourhoods in central locations (Karaman, 2013a; 2014). Authorities invoke the threat of an imminent earthquake to justify comprehensive residential redevelopment of these areas in the name of ‘urban transformation’. However, non-stated mandates appear to be maximization of land rent (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), entrenchment of a propertied notion of citizenship (Roy, 2003), and keeping the construction sector busy.

Urban renewal projects are typically announced without any prior consultation with the locals and have resulted in the involuntary displacement of residents who have no right or means to participate in renewal schemes. Thus, they have become objects of discontent and contestation. Various neighbourhood-based grassroots initiatives have emerged to contest urban renewal. However, in various grassroots mobilizations against urban renewal since the mid-2000s, claims invoking the right to the city have generally taken a back seat to claims based on property rights (Karaman, 2014; see also Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010; Lovering and Turkmen, 2011; Shin, 2013). This poses ethical dilemmas for citywide activist circles (such as the Urbanization Movement of Society, IMECE), who advocate progressive urbanisms that emphasize use value (over exchange value) and collective rights to production of space. There have been attempts to establish a citywide confederation to bring all neighbourhoods facing threat of renewal together under a common banner. Yet these have not led to a lasting organizational structure, owing to the tendency of individual neighbourhoods to focus on their particular problems and on their own ongoing negotiations with the state on the basis of property rights, as well as a failure to develop a shared political agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from neighborhood based grassroots associations there have also been various thematic mobilizations<sup>10</sup> against a variety of interventions in public spaces and cultural assets. Most notably,

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<sup>8</sup> Pérouse (2014) offers a detailed inventory of ongoing and recently launched mega projects in Istanbul. For latest updates also see: <http://megaprojeleristanbul.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Since 2015 a new initiative called ‘Mahalleler Birliği’ (Union of Neighbourhoods) has gained significant momentum in bringing together numerous neighbourhoods in Istanbul and other cities. For information see: <https://mahallelerbirligi.org/>

<sup>10</sup> See Özdemir and Eraydin (2012) for a detailed inventory of various urban social movements in Istanbul.



these include mobilizations against the Third Bosphorus Bridge, the new international airport, the privatization and redevelopment of public lands in central and coastal locations (for example, Galataport, Haydarpaşa, Haliçport) and the redevelopment of buildings of historic value (for example, the Emek movie theatre). While these mobilizations have reflected broader sensibilities about urban commons and collective memory, prior to the Gezi resistance their impact remained also rather limited. Initially opposition to the Taksim redevelopment project – led by Gezi Park Association didn't seem to have a broad appeal within the public at large either.

In September of 2011 the Istanbul Metropolitan Council approved planning revisions for the “pedestrianization of Taksim Square.”<sup>11</sup> The project involved taking the main roads that met at the square underground via tunnels, with the aim of removing motorized vehicle traffic from the square's surface. The most controversial part of the project was the construction of a building complex on the site of Gezi Park, the facades of which would imitate an old military barracks that once stood on the site of the public park but was demolished entirely in 1940.

The Taksim project is part of a broader project to sterilize and commercialize the central districts of Istanbul to maximize their potential for tourism, retail and high-end housing. On at least one occasion the mayor of Beyoğlu (the central district in which Taksim Square is located) has highlighted the importance of ‘quality’ in the area to attract tourists (Milliyet, 2011). In practice, this means strict regulation of sidewalk cafés and bars, as well as the activities of street musicians. Small shops, family-run businesses and independent bookstores were gradually replaced by shopping malls, boutique hotels, high-end retail stores and art galleries (Adanalı, 2011; Karaman 2013b). Taksim Square and Gezi Park sit at the very centre of this disciplinary operation, posing a major challenge for the authorities. The square has historically been a terrain of conflict and clashes between trade unions/leftist activists and state authorities seeking to prevent political rallies. The adjacent Gezi Park is a public refuge in a highly congested and commercialized area and a meeting ground for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) individuals at night (Zengin, 2013). It is precisely these unregulated and potentially subversive qualities of Taksim Square that the proposed project would discipline and replace with scripted and ‘safe’ spaces of consumption. At the peak of the Gezi revolt, in response to a question as to the programme for the new building complex, Erdoğan stated that the ground floor would be allocated to shops, cafés and a city museum, while the upper floors would be a hotel. He defended the project by stating that the city centre failed to offer tourists quality options for lodging and shopping. Accordingly, the square would also be stripped of its function as a place of assembly. Upon announcement of the Taksim pedestrianization project, the authorities instituted a de facto demonstration ban in the area, accompanied by a zero-tolerance approach to any political rallies.<sup>12</sup> Those who came to celebrate May Day 2013 in Taksim Square were brutally dispersed by the police using tear gas and water cannons.

Besides the fact that the Taksim project would lead to the commercialization and political sterilization of public space, the attempted demolition of Gezi Park also brought the issue of

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<sup>11</sup> September 16, Decision no 2111.

<sup>12</sup> While the Gezi uprising was unfolding, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was busy reclaiming land in the Sea of Marmara to create two large ‘squares’ (*meydan*)—one on the European side and another on the Asian side—for large-scale public gatherings, rallies and fairs. These giant rally grounds, the construction of which was supervised and promoted by Erdoğan himself, were aimed at keeping the city demonstration free.

environmental degradation into public debates. The imminent threat of the project to Gezi Park's decades-old trees resonated not only with those who were concerned about the ongoing pressure on other urban green areas (parks, market gardens): the AKP's other mega urban projects (the Third Bosphorus Bridge, the third airport and Kanal Istanbul) were also expected to cause great environmental damage, as were large infrastructural projects in rural areas that would threaten rural livelihoods and ecologies.

Over the past decade, peripheral towns and rural areas have experienced their share of the AKP's development model, which depends on the trinity of construction, real estate and infrastructure. Mining and energy (renewable as well as carbon-based), alongside construction and transportation, have been among the fastest-growing sectors in Turkey. The liberalization of these sectors, which had predominantly been under state monopoly until the early 2000s, coupled with the cheap and accessible credit that was being pumped into the Turkish financial market, led to Turkey's vast countryside being opened up to an unprecedented scramble to set up extractive industries and infrastructural projects.

Although such developments can be found in all regions of the country in increasing numbers since the early 2000s, some regions are more vulnerable to the penetration of capital than others. The Black Sea Region (BSR) tops this list, not only on account of the number of extractive and infrastructural projects there, but also owing to the continuing importance of agriculture as a source of livelihood (DOKA, 2013). For instance, the countryside of Sinop, the northernmost province of the country, is home to two major energy projects: a nuclear power plant that will be Turkey's first, and a major thermal power plant with an installed capacity of 2,000 MW. However, what threatens the rural areas most extensively is ironically a post-carbon technology: a recent wave of investment in small hydropower plant (SHP or small hydro, abbreviated as HES in Turkish) projects have been turning almost every single valley and creek into a construction site.<sup>13</sup> Following the privatization of energy production through a series of legislations, the AKP government launched an aggressive programme targeting 2,000 small (and large) hydropower plants by 2023, the centennial of the Turkish Republic (see Islar, 2012; Erensü, 2013a). Even though the rapid diffusion of these new economies in rural areas lacks an official title, as in the case of 'urban transformation', activists often refer to it as 'rural transformation'. Both transformations are perceived as twin spatial extensions of the AKP's economic policies.<sup>14</sup>

The Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Public Works and Housing were united in June 2011 under the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, a development that affirmed these perceptions. As the required permit and regulation/ audit procedures followed the same logic in both the cities and the countryside, it made sense to put them under one roof for the sake of efficiency. Although infrastructure and extraction activities in rural areas are undertaken by private

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<sup>13</sup>As run-of-the-river structures, small hydropower plants require neither damming nor a reservoir. They are therefore regarded as acceptable energy solutions in the post-carbon transition era. They are eligible for generous funding through the World Bank's green energy funds, qualify for Renewable Energy Credits that can be exchanged on carbon markets, and are promoted as environmentally friendly alternatives to large dams by international environmental NGOs such as Rivers International and Greenpeace, as well as by the Turkish state (Erensü, 2013a).

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the overlap between actors of urban and rural transformation, visit the website of Networks of Dispossession (<http://mulksuzlestirme.org/index.en.html>), an activist collective born out of occupied Gezi Park, which undertakes data compiling and mapping projects to render the relationship between capital, construction and political power in Turkey more visible.

companies, the government has played a determining role in rural transformation both at a rhetorical level and through the permit and regulatory mechanisms of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. The ministry's environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedures are particularly notorious for being overly business-friendly. Commonly known by their Turkish acronym ÇED, and source of many controversies, EIA processes came into effect in 1993. Since then, only 32 of the total 43,994 applications have been declined (Salihoğlu, 2013).

Immediate Expropriation Law has been a major legal tool for facilitating construction projects both in the countryside and in the cities. This law was enacted in 1956 in the context of the cold war, and grants the Cabinet of Turkey the authority to bypass the usual legal procedures to confiscate property in anticipation of imminent war. In the past decade, Immediate Expropriation has been routinely used, the Cabinet signing dozens of confiscations almost every week. The threat of an imminent earthquake and the imperative of energy independence are used to justify the urgency of urban renewal and infrastructure investments. Thus, many urban residents and rural dwellers received expropriation notices before they even found out about the projects planned for their environments.

Beyond the similarities of legal tools and procedures, there are also examples in which the logics of urban and rural transformations intersect. Many construction companies of the speculative-growth era are active in both fields, and hybrid spatial transformation projects proliferate. For example, the Turkish developer giant Ağaoğlu Group's has built super-luxurious gated communities in Istanbul, the electricity for which comes from wind power plants in the countryside built by its subsidiary, Ağaoğlu Energy. An even more striking example of a hybrid project is the 'touristic urban transformation project' in Hemşin, the tiniest county in Turkey, with a population of 2,200. At the centre of this project by the BM Energy Group stand two small hydro projects on the Pazar stream of the Hemşin River, one with 1.3 MW and the other with 1.8 MW installed capacity. When the developer realized that the power plant that was to be built near the entrance of the county centre would create a mini-lake that would submerge some houses and businesses, the project evolved from an energy project to a real-estate project. In partnership with TOKI (the Turkish Housing Development Administration), the project now aspires to boost tourism in the county through the building of 76 housing units, 45 offices and a hotel, as well as recreational areas around the mini-lake.

One outcome of these aggressive interventions in the rural areas has been the popularization and politicization of environmentalism, which had been mostly a middle-class sensitivity in the 1990s and largely confined to the offices of international mainstream environmental NGOs. However, over the past decade hundreds of new grassroots environmental collectives named after either a town, a village or an entire valley have popped up across the country, even in the country's remotest corners, where people had no prior experience of political activism. Even though land and water grabs caused by extractive projects directly threaten agricultural life, it is not possible to reduce the sporadic rural opposition to the categories of peasant movements or environmentalism of the poor (Adaman et al., 2014; cf. Martinez-Alier, 2003): rural opposition comprises a variety of groups and actors and reflects the multiplicity of living arrangements along the urban-rural spectrum in contemporary Turkey (Öztürk et al., 2013; see also Keyder and Yenal, 2013). This spectrum includes suburban and seasonal villagers, rural-urban dual-place residents, first- and second-generation rural-to-urban migrants who have completely dropped out of

agricultural activity but have maintained close ties with their rural homelands, returning retirees, as well as more sedentary traditional farming communities. Given this multiplicity of rural actors and locations, rural ecological movements have been able to mobilize, establish contacts and form coalitions in villages, towns and metropolises, maintaining their rural core while shaping both the rural and the urban oppositional landscapes.

#### 4. Defending and Making *Yaşam Alanı* (Life Space)

In terms of the extent to which these highly diverse mobilizations were able to develop a common political lexicon, one humble yet powerful phrase stands out: *yaşam alanı* (life space).<sup>15</sup> Prior to Gezi, this catchphrase had been circulating among urban activists against commodification, privatization and commercialization of urban spaces as well as urban renewal projects, and among rural activists against extraction and energy infrastructures. Closely associated yet different from the increasingly popular concept of the ‘commons’, *yaşam alanı* connotes spaces of refuge that have maintained a high level of autonomy from the value circuits of capital accumulation. It also has connotations of a safe space in which people may breathe and enjoy and express themselves. The notion of *yaşam alanı* not only enabled articulations between people’s myriad grievances against various spatial interventions but also provided alternative political horizons.

It was the common goal of defending *yaşam alanı* that successfully articulated and combined various political agendas during the Gezi resistance and enabled their de-localization (Erensü, 2013b). The phrase was uttered countless times by the occupiers of Gezi Park.<sup>16</sup> However, the Gezi occupation was not simply in defense of an existing life space, but entailed the claim over shared space in the making (Erensü, 2013c; Karaman, 2013b). During its occupation from 1 to 15 June 2013, Gezi Park housed occupiers in hundreds of tents and groups from a variety of political causes, including environmentalists, feminists, Kemalists, nationalists, socialists, communists, anticapitalist Islamists, anarchists, pro-Alevî, pro-LGBTQ and pro-Kurdish-rights groups, and even football fan groups. Park occupiers established a clinic, a communal kitchen, a nursery, a library, a communications office and a market garden. Monetary exchange was banished from the grounds. In short, park residents were impatiently rushing to produce and proliferate what had been under attack over the previous decade: their *yaşam alanı*.

Rancière (2001, paragraph 22, n.p.) argues that ‘police intervention in public spaces does not consist primarily in the interpellation of demonstrators [as Althusser would claim] but in the breaking up of demonstrations’. The police’s main job is to protect the existing spatial configuration against perceived transgressions. According to the police, a road is for facilitating circulation and not for demonstrations. Egalitarian, dissentual politics transforms this space by refiguring ‘what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein’ (ibid.). This entails a certain theatricality (Davis, 2010: 86). In the case of Gezi, this amounted to the performative

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<sup>15</sup> We are aware that ‘life space’ might sound much like *lebensraum*, thus bringing to mind a place-based politics that is exclusionary and even xenophobic. The Turkish phrase, however, has neither of these connotations, nor does it share the same lineage. That is one of the reasons why we prefer to use the phrase in Turkish.

<sup>16</sup> The first of the four ‘emergent demands’ Taksim Solidarity announced on 3 June was that ‘Gezi Park shall remain as a park. We will allow neither the [construction of the] Topçu Barracks nor the plundering of all our natural and life spaces’ (Taksim Dayanışması, 2013, emphasis added).

demonstration of not only equality but also of possible futures and lives. Those who lived in the park during its Commune days, worked in its cooperatively run facilities or attended its yoga, gender equality and ecological society workshops, struggle to put their experience into words. The title of a recent compilation by Müge Iplikçi (2013) of 20 interviews with Gezi participants touches the core of this experience: *Biz Orada Mutluyduk* (We Were Happy There). Most of the interviewees in the compilation recall the Commune days with emotionally laden expressions such as ‘Alice in Wonderland’, ‘my real home’ or ‘a dream’. What energized and enchanted the hundreds of thousands of Commune participants was indeed the felt interrelatedness between reclaiming and transforming a space into an alternative *yaşam alanı*, and the tangible possibility of imagining a different future.<sup>17</sup> As one Commune participant put it: ‘People said: “Open space for our lives as a whole, not just for green space!” They didn’t just look for green spaces, they looked for their lives’ (ibid.: 235). In this context ‘space’ in *yaşam alanı* should not be understood merely as a physical space or as a loose metaphor; it became a “mode of political thinking” (Dikeç, 2012: 670).<sup>18</sup> In this sense, *yaşam alanı* not only marked the event and the commune itself, but also shaped the political imaginaries and practices in Gezi’s aftermath.

## 5. Delocalizing the Event: Gezi’s Aftermath

The day of 31 May 2014, which marked the first anniversary of the Gezi uprising, was characterized by a grand display of force by the government, disappointing to many who had taken part in the uprising a year before and had high expectations for a replay. Tens of thousands took to the streets at the call of Taksim Solidarity, an umbrella organization<sup>19</sup> founded before the Gezi revolt that assumed a crucial organizational role during the Commune days. However, the crowd

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<sup>17</sup> We highlight Gezi’s communal and egalitarian aspects not in order to portray it as being free from exclusion, conflict or unequal power relations. As it claims and occupies space, some sort of enclosure and exclusion is often part of the logic of communing, even in its progressive forms (cf. Harvey, 2012). The celebration of occupied Gezi as the ultimate public space open to all grievants’ voices runs the risk of eliding the existence of different forms of publicness (Hammond and Angell, 2013). Based on their fieldwork in Eyüp, an AKP stronghold of Istanbul, Hammond and Angell (ibid.) show that conservative Istanbulites were indifferent to the protests in Taksim Square, a part of the city they regarded as unruly and decadent. Throughout the weekends during which Gezi Park was occupied, some other parks of Istanbul were, as usual, filled with working-class families who were barbecuing, and displaying little concern with the events that were shaking the city. Within the Gezi grounds there were occasional moments of conflict and even animosity, most notably between Kemalists/nationalists and pro-Kurdish groups, and between football fans chanting sexist slogans and feminists. In terms of the struggle itself there were inequalities too. The cost of the resistance was not borne equally by all either: almost all who lost their lives during the uprising were of Alevî origin and living in the marginalized districts of Istanbul or in other cities across Turkey. There were no deaths in and around Gezi Park, and neither in centrally located secular (upper) middle-class districts such as Beşiktaş, nor in Kadıköy, whose residents participated in great numbers in the uprising (Karakaya-Stump, 2014). A plausible explanation for this is that ‘the state apparatus calibrates the scale of its violence according to its targets’ (ibid.: n.p.).

<sup>18</sup> Dikeç (2012), in his approach to ‘space as a mode of political thinking’, refers to several things. At a more tangible level, the concept refers to the materiality of contestations on and in space: ‘people act from the material conditions of their spaces ... they also act in physical spaces and make spaces, both topographic and conceptual’ (2012: 674, original emphasis). At a theoretical level it also refers to the conceptual work that space does in thinking about politics. While Dikeç seems to associate these more conceptual aspects with political theory, we also find them relevant to political activism, as illustrated by the notion of *yaşam alanı*.

<sup>19</sup> Its constituents include various civil-society organizations, professional associations, unions, activist groups and political parties (see <http://taksimdayanisma.org/bilesenler> (accessed 6 June 2016)).

lagged behind on the previous year both in size and in enthusiasm and was an easy target for the overly prepared security forces. What had happened to the Gezi spirit?

In his discussion of the political sequences of contemporary riots, Badiou (2012: 38–39) draws attention to a typical, yet critical, post-riot phase, during which life seems to retreat to its natural course. However, ‘even when a majority of people revert to ordinary existence’, Badiou reassures us, ‘they leave behind them an *energy* that is subsequently going to be seized on and organized’ (*ibid.*: 91, original emphasis). This ‘intervallic period’, to use Badiou’s terminology, becomes the stage in which the *political* reawakening inaugurated by the riots could lead to a new modality of politics (*ibid.*: 42). Badiou insists that the political (truth) is rooted in the contingency of the riot as an unprecedented event, yet the former is not reducible to the latter (*ibid.*: 89). That is why the ‘intervallic period’ is crucial to determining the possible political and organizational horizon into which the momentary break of the riots could unfold. ‘The urgent tasks to undertake’ in the aftermath of riots, as Swyngedouw (2014: 134) asserts, ‘revolve centrally around inventing new modes and practices of collective political organization’.

However, organizing the political energy of a ruptural event such as Gezi while remaining loyal to its radical heterogeneity is—to say the least—a difficult task. After the revolt, two types of attempts at maintaining Gezi’s political energy proved ineffective. One was institutional representation through umbrella organizations such as Taksim Solidarity,<sup>20</sup> or formal channels of electoral politics.<sup>21</sup> There were also efforts to repeat Gezi in its original place. For months following the police’s crushing of the Commune, activists attempted countless times to re-occupy Gezi Park and Taksim Square, without success. Their attempts were at odds with the unpredictable contingent nature and political openness of Gezi. If we may refer to these tendencies as *electoralization* and *fetishization* of Gezi, respectively, their failures were instructive: organizing needed to expand the *political* opened up by Gezi in its various modalities and spatialities to go beyond institutional formalization or a literal emplacement in the space of the park itself. This was further driven home by the diverse and piecemeal yet influential sociospatial practices that served to deepen the Gezi effect in its aftermath.

After the police raid that dispersed the Gezi Commune on 15 and 16 June 2013, many protestors who failed to access the park because of the heavy police presence reconvened in a small park in Beşiktaş, a few kilometres away from Taksim, to hold a public meeting open to everyone. This meeting set a precedent for the rapidly proliferating park forums across Istanbul and other cities. Within a week, some 65 forums were being held daily on different squares and in public parks in Istanbul, and in more than 50 locations across the country (Hemzemin, 2013). Park forums played a very timely and crucial role in turning a possible retreat into a process of reorganization

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<sup>20</sup> The industrious staff and spokespeople of Taksim Solidarity provided invaluable logistics services (such as public and press relations, health services and legal consultations) during and after the occupation, and were eventually targeted and persecuted by the government. However, despite being accessible to everyone, it remained dominated by familiar opposition groups such as unions, political parties and various left fractions—the usual suspects in the eyes of the AKP government.

<sup>21</sup> While most opposition parties paid lip service to the memory of the occupation days, members of some activist circles argued for a common Gezi candidate for the 2014 local elections and some went as far as establishing the Gezi Party. McAdam and Tarrow (2010) provide an insightful analysis of the literature that studies the uneasy relationship between the ‘ballots’ and ‘barricades’.

and in transporting (and translating) the Commune experience to other locations. It also helped keep the public encounter and discussions going for months in the form of popular assemblies and work groups. A year later, as expected, many forums had already faded, yet many others, especially those that managed to attach themselves to a place-based issue (a community garden under threat, or a train station being destroyed) survived and thus contributed to the organization of the post-Gezi period. Although only a few managed to survive until the second anniversary of the uprising, the park forum experience led to the emergence of myriad political collectives focusing on a range of topics such as women's rights, ecology or workers' rights, as well as to the birth of new collective places for alternative social and economic practices such as bartering, squatting, urban agriculture and seed exchange.

Gezi particularly echoed in locations that were hurt by the AKP's spatial interventions. Three months after the Gezi occupation, students of the Middle East Technical University (METU) and residents of the adjacent Yüzüncü Yıl and Çiğdem neighbourhoods in Ankara collectively stood up against the construction of a highway that would bisect the area and threaten thousands of trees. Historic *bostans* (urban market gardens) in Istanbul that were threatened by urban renewal projects made headlines for the first time owing to small groups of local activists. The ancient Hevsel Gardens of Diyarbakir were defended by a three-week-long Gezi-like occupation in March 2014, forging an unprecedented link between Turkish Kurdistan and Istanbul. The practice of collectively squatting in unused buildings was used for the first time in various neighbourhoods of Istanbul and Ankara. From ecological struggles in Arhavi, Artvin and Amasya to urban battles in Tuzluca and Okmeydanı Gezi's 'value extend[ed] beyond it' (Badiou, 2012: 95); thus, what emerged at the site of Gezi delocalized and then re-localized in other sites, connecting all these sites.

However, our emphasis on the de-localized spatialization of Gezi does not imply that what the Gezi spirit has accomplished is merely a breakthrough for place-based social movements. This would be a rather limited take on the relationship between space and politics. Rather, and perhaps more importantly, Gezi has enabled the opening of a political space: unexpected encounters have opened up cracks in the existing order and its spatial compartmentalizations. One striking example has been that of *yeryüzü sofralari* (earth meals). Led by a group called Anti-capitalist Muslims, an active constituent of the Gezi Commune, *yeryüzü sofralari* were modest *iftars* (dinners to break the Ramadan fast), collectively observed in the streets and parks of Istanbul. These *iftars* were meant to draw attention to the irony of indulging in extravagant *iftar* feasts served in luxurious restaurants precisely in a month that was supposed to be about sharing—an implicit denunciation of AKP's new upper-class elites. Although the Anti-capitalist Muslims had initiated *yeryüzü sofralari* two years before Gezi, the drive became visible and much more powerful within the impact field of Gezi, as its anti-consumerist stance resonated with the growing sentiment of those who were against the commercialization of urban centres. The first *yeryüzü sofralari*, which preceded Gezi, was held in Istiklal Avenue, the most popular pedestrian street leading to Taksim Square, and spread to park forums, involving thousands of people during July and August 2013. The real power of *yeryüzü sofralari*, however, lay in its ability to challenge 'the religion card' the AKP was claiming ownership to (Taştekin, 2013), in its "surpassing the borders" between the secular and the pious and thus "heralding a new cultural basin" for a new democratic horizon (Göle, 2013).

In many ways—through its diverse de-localizations and articulations of life spaces—Gezi not only opened up politics but also the urban itself. In this sense, its diverse spatialities also address recent discussions on the planetary scale of urbanization, particularly the urgent need to understand the urban beyond the conceptual and physical boundaries of the city (Merrifield, 2013; Sheppard et al., 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Andy Merrifield (2012) makes a relevant point when he draws attention to how contemporary urban riots and occupations go beyond the urban, blur its boundaries and explode it onto its perceived outside(s):

This new space is a space neither rooted in place nor circulating in space, but rather one inseparable combination of the two ... This unity is simultaneously urban and post-urban, an urban politics that somehow breaks the boundaries of the urban itself; of urbanism going beyond itself ... the stake of protest is not strictly the city nor even the urban; yet perhaps, just perhaps, it is something about contemporary planetary urban society that enables these protests to be made, that permits and engenders such a definition of protest (Merrifield, 2012: 278–79).

A recent example of such an opening up of the urban in the political imagination worth mentioning is *Kuzey Ormanlari Savunmasi* (Northern Forests Defence).<sup>22</sup> Formed in response to the plans for the Third Bosphorus Bridge and the third airport, which would damage the forest covering northern Istanbul, this collective grew during the uprising and developed in its aftermath by forging alliances within the larger Black Sea Region along the same ecological forest line.<sup>23</sup> Although the collective is as yet only taking its first steps, its existence is significant in destabilizing the usually imagined relationship between Istanbul city proper and its hinterland, which is based on the city's simultaneous exploitation and silencing of the hinterland with increasing intensity during the era of AKP rule. The collective aims to treat the economic, ecological and social degradation in Istanbul's hinterland on par with the city's own and to disrupt the notion of Istanbul proper. This example is one among many that illustrate how Gezi enabled novel political imaginaries by articulating the urban, the rural and nature.

## 6. Conclusion

In the autumn of 2011, months before the Gezi revolt, a series of events were organized in Gezi Park under the banners 'Occupy Istanbul' and 'Ayaklan (Rebel) Istanbul', which were inspired by the ongoing Occupy movements in the US and Europe. Coordinated via social media, these events provided a stage for dozens of people (the major gathering on 30 October drew around a hundred participants) to meet each other and to discuss strategies for anti-capitalist resistance (Bianet, 2011). These modest forum-style meetings—each lasting for a few hours and occupying only a tiny section of the park—did, however, not evolve into an occupy-like camp and barely registered in the collective political memory. Gezi Park would have its profound moment of politicization a year and a half later, with no advance planning or organization.

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<sup>22</sup> For further information, see <http://www.kuzeyormanlari.org/> (accessed 6 June 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Such expansive alliances also effectively undermine the AKP's tactic of marginalizing activists in Istanbul (and Gezi) as looters and irresponsible decadents as opposed to pious, loyal, proper citizens who represent the authentic spirit of the nation and one associated with the provincial heartlands.



There is already an immense (journalistic and academic) literature on various aspects of the Gezi revolt. As an overdetermined moment of outburst, the event has escaped various attempts to pin it down in terms of its causes. If the Gezi revolt is elusive in terms of its causes and mass dynamics (cf. Goodwin, 2011), its spatialities offer valuable insights. We therefore focused on the political work that space does at a time when capitalism increasingly resuscitates itself through production of space. The latter, in turn, becomes both the cause and the stage of revolt (Brenner, 2013: 89). From this perspective, Gezi is perhaps the quintessential urban revolt among its counterparts in Greece, the US, Egypt, Spain and Brazil, as it was both the cause and the means of the revolt—cause not only in the sense of an initial instigator but also in the sense of a ‘legitimate cause’ that had the capacity to open up a profound space for the expression of popular dissent in defiance of an increasingly uncompromising neoliberal Islamist consensus.

The unprecedented form and energy of the revolt are undoubtedly linked to the centrality of the park that is arguably located in Istanbul’s—and Turkey’s—most central open public space. In the context of the authorities’ determination to turn such an exceptionally positioned place of encounter and recreation into a private consumption complex, the overall scene was nothing short of a grotesque caricature of the widespread colonization of life spaces across Turkey in the previous decade. The Gezi revolt interrupted the established imperative to foreground construction and real estate as major means to achieving development and economic growth. At the same time it exposed the illegitimacy of the institutionalized representative system as being far removed from the people (Dikeç, 2013b). However, Gezi’s real potency lay in the fact that beyond resulting in a mere temporary destabilization of the established order, it actively demonstrated new ways of inhabiting and making space, of providing real channels for participating in the production of space, with immediate and tangible effects. We argue that *yaşam alanı* (life space), as a spatial political imaginary, was crucial in articulating political demands around urban and rural commons, spaces of livelihoods and the real possibility of another life. It facilitated novel articulations between various political agendas, which were hitherto seen as representing incompatible stances, and led to the widespread de-localization of Gezi across the rural–urban continuum.

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**Sinan Erensü**, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208, USA, [erensu@northwestern.edu](mailto:erensu@northwestern.edu)

**Ozan Karaman**, Université Paris-Est, Laboratoire Techniques, Territoires et Sociétés (Latts), UMR CNRS 8134, Ecole des Ponts ParisTech, 6-8 avenue Blaise Pascal, 77455 Marne la Vallée, France, ozan.karaman@enpc.fr

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