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## ***New forms of resistance in authoritarian Turkey: the case of autonomous political collectives***

**Abstract:** This research presents the ways in which certain political collectives (Don Quixote Cycling Collective [Don Kışot Bisiklet Kolektif], Defense of Northern Forests [Kuzey Ormanları Savunması], Plaza Action Platform [Plaza Eylem Platformu], and Kadıköy City Solidarity [Kadıköy Kent Dayanışması] in Istanbul seek to challenge the ongoing government repression and social engineering by initiating a grassroots movement through simple everyday practices such as riding a bike. In the absence of a possibility to engage in institutional and traditional politics, such practices are turned into subtle political tools that enable a long-term mobilization. These activities create spaces for socialization where new social norms are born and negotiated outside the social and political agenda of the government. Consequently, this paper tries to demonstrate the ways in which the multiplication of such autonomous zones transform the social fabric and thereupon, the politics.

### **Working Paper**

Most researchers agree on the fact that there are no ontological differences between the social movements that takes place in authoritarian political systems and those elsewhere. Nevertheless there is a consensus over the impact of politics in each specific country or region on the formation of collective action. Repertoires of contention are shaped according to the resources of the mobilized groups and thus, are related to their interactions with the political institutions.<sup>1</sup> According to the some researchers authoritarianism and repression may lead to disengagement.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is just as possible to observe disguised forms of resistance under authoritarian regimes. When explicit forms of political conflict is not possible, actors engage in *everyday forms of resistance* as a tactical choice in order to reduce risks according to James C. Scott.<sup>3</sup> Asef Bayat proposes the concept of *social non-movement* (collective action of non-collective actors) in order to explain how Iranian women practice resistance by entering in working environments dominated by men, changing the balance of power relations, and thus modifying social relations through individual actions.<sup>4</sup> Others assert that protest forms are gaining artistic properties. Christophe Traini shows how the spread of music can be an effective mean when it comes to unite the public under a single cause. Music can also correspond to a political socialization of younger generations.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Mathilde Arrigoni

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<sup>1</sup>Bennani-Chraïbi M., Olivier, Fillieule (dir), 2003, *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po ; Dorronsoro G., 2005, *La Turquie conteste. Mobilisations sociales et régimes sécuritaires*, Paris, CNRS Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Olivier, Fillieule, (dir.), *Le désengagement militant*, Belin, Paris, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, 1989. Everyday Forms of Resistance. *Copenhagen Papers*, 4, 33–62, p. 35

<sup>4</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics : How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Christophe, Traini, *Musique en colère*, Presses de SciencesPo, Paris, 2008.

discusses the modalities of *contentious theatre* in order to explain how theatre can represent a political resistance.<sup>6</sup>

This paper aims to discuss the conditions for political mobilization in authoritarian Turkey by analyzing four grassroots political collectives based in Istanbul: Don Quixote Cycling Collective (*Don Kişot Bisiklet Kolektifi*), The Defense of Northern Forests (*Kuzey Ormanları Savunması*), Plaza Action Platform (*Plaza Eylem Platformu*) and Kadıköy City Solidarity (*Kadıköy Kent Dayanışması*). By presenting a local dimension that contradicts the generalist discourse, according to which forms of political resistance in Turkey are bound to be repressed by the state, I will try to alternate between the local and the generalist narrative in order to better comprehend the socio-political situation in Istanbul's pockets of resistance. The backbone of this paper is based on a research that has been carried out in Istanbul since 2016 at intervals comprises of 35 semi-structured interviews and participant observations that took place in forums, or general assemblies, shared spaces as well as reconnaissance expeditions (to areas affected by giant and destructive infrastructure projects) and participating in editorial work destined to be shared online covering latest demonstrations and related material.

I argue that these collectives create spaces where politics are elaborated through direct actions directed towards daily issues which are not explicitly political such as the protection of a village or an urban neighborhood that are affected by poor urban planning and miscarried infrastructural projects. Similarly, promoting the use of bicycles rather than cars in order to advocate an alternative urban life or creating a new socio-cultural environment for high-income white collars who complain of antisocial conditions, mobbing etc. In order to understand how these collectives operate, first, it is essential to identify and analyze the context in which the actions are carried out as well as internal constraints of this context and the area of impact of these groups. Second, it is necessary to highlight their internal organization and interrogate possible hierarchies among and within these groups.

The concept of the *social movement space*<sup>7</sup> offers us a very useful conceptual tool for the articulation of structural (relative autonomy of the social movement space and the relationship it has with other domains of the social world) with the pragmatic and subjective dimensions (conditions and modes of mobilization of actors in contentious actions and their perceptions). This helps to explain the ways in which the local level shape the actions and how they are perceived by actors.<sup>8</sup> This notion allows us also to better understand the impact of the physical spaces on social movements<sup>9</sup> and explain how the occupation of a space by activists (for example a short-term occupation of a building, or a concentration of different activist groups in a specific neighborhood) affects the practices and internal dynamics of activist groups.

According to Christophe Aguiton and Philippe Corcuff there will be a disconnection of political and social sphere because of the differences of temporalities between these two

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<sup>6</sup>Mathilde, Arrigoni, « Introduction », *Le théâtre contestataire*. Sous la direction de Arrigoni Mathilde. Presses de Sciences Po, 2017, pp. 7-12.

<sup>7</sup>Lilian, Mathieu, « L'espace des mouvements sociaux », *Politix*, vol. 1, n°77, 2007, pp. 131-151.

<sup>8</sup>The appropriate strategies for formal structures of a political action are always decided at the local level: modalities (elections, protestations, occupation, insurrection), the state of balance of power (number of activists, the power of opposition, the nature of claim), the capacity of mobilization (network, interpersonal skills, history of conflicts) Albert Ogien and Sandra Laugier, *Le principe démocratie. Enquête sur les nouvelles formes du politique*, Paris, Editions La Découverte, 2014.

<sup>9</sup>Nilüfer Göle, « Mайдan : nouveau protagoniste du politique », in N. Göle, Y, Cohen (dir.), *La Démocratie de la place publique*, Paris, *Politika*, 2018. Paul Cormier, « Opérationnaliser les espaces du militantisme en contexte répressif, enjeux théoriques et méthodologiques. Le cas de la gauche radicale turque dans les années 1970 à Ankara et Istanbul », 13<sup>ème</sup> congrès de AFSP, 2015.

spheres.<sup>10</sup> Cécile Péchu discuss the existence of a *militant field* different from the partisan field and structured according to specific poles.<sup>11</sup> Gérard Mauger proposes the notion of the *social movement field* as a component of the political field in which we find four component; unionist, associative, intellectual and political.<sup>12</sup> The common point of these approaches is that they are interested with the relationship between social movements and partisan/institutional politics and they are inspired by the *theory of field*, the research tradition of Pierre Bourdieu. Although similar to the *social movement sector* conceptualized by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald<sup>13</sup>, it differs from the latter by the fact that it does not aim only to comprehend the relations between different causes through an analyze of the competition for the acquisition of resources. The aim of the notion of *social movements space* is to grasp the dynamics of a social world where different movements and organizations are in interdependence. It differs also from *theory of field* of Bourdieu because the space of social movements do not have sufficient degree of objectification, structuration and institutionalization in order to be defined as a *field*<sup>14</sup>. It appears as a sphere of informal activity where we find a multiplication of issues different and disconnected from one another and its autonomy from other worlds (such as party politics) vary according to contexts. Then, *Social movements space* is defined as a world where we find practices and meanings relatively autonomous (independent) and mobilizations that are linked together by relations of interdependence. This auto-referential space is distinguished from the other components of the social world because it proposes to its actors' specific issues and is organized by temporalities, rules and evaluation principals that constrain the practices, positions, expectations and strategies of actors.

These concepts will form the theoretical framework of this paper in which, after a brief introduction of social movements in Turkey, structural dimensions of the social movement space will be discussed by pointing out the relations of interdependence and its relative autonomy. In the second part, the subjective and pragmatic dimensions of this space will be analyzed. This analysis will be carried out through a scrutiny of four (already mentioned) political collectives based in Istanbul. The focus will be on defining the internal constraints of social movement space in relation to the context of the post-Gezi period (2013 onwards).

## **Social movements in Turkey: struggle for autonomy**

Social movements in Turkey were almost completely subordinated to the political field for a long time. They were organized under the relative control of unions that were also subordinated to a political party. Student movement of 1970 was highly dependent either to far left (Dev-Yol, Dev-Sol etc.) or to nationalists controlled by MHP, the nationalist party. Although the trauma of the 1980 coup on the far left made it hard for the militants to be organized around a political movement, the legacy of the hierarchical political structures persisted in organization and practice and in the late 1980s social movements began to

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<sup>10</sup> Christophe Aguiton, Philippe Corcuff, « Mouvements sociaux et politique : entre anciens modèles et enjeux nouveaux », *Mouvements*, 3, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cécile Péchu, *Du Comité des mal logés à Droit au logement, sociologie d'une mobilisation*, thèse de doctorat en science politique, IEP de Paris, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Mauger (G.), « Pour une politique réflexive du mouvement social », in Cours-Salies (P.), Vakaloulis (M.), dir., *Les mobilisations collectives : une controverse sociologique*, Paris, PUF, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, « Resource Mobilization and Social Movements : A Partial Theory », *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (6), 1977, p. 1220.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, « La représentation politique. Eléments pour une théorie du champ politique », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n°36 -37, février-mars 1981, pp. 3-24.

emerge. The period between March and April 1988 is called the “labor movement spring.” Different social groups participated to the movement such as students from Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, who organized ‘forums’, protests and assemblies in order to support the strikers.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the deregulation of markets, entrance of multinational firms into the economy without any governmental control, social movements organized for environmental causes also emerged. The social movement of the Bergama farmers is representative of this rise: launched in 1996 against the Eurogold company that was planning the exploitation of the gold mine in Bergama with the use of cyanide, this movement managed to ban the use of the product. An anti-nuclear movement was also created in order to protest against the plans of building a nuclear power plant at Mersin Akkuyu. Mobilized between 1992 and 2000, the Anti-Nuclear Platform succeeded in canceling the project. “Labor movement spring” constitutes not only the point of departure of social movements but also the social and historical foundation of alter-globalization movement in Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

As Gülçin Erdi Lelandais has showed in her work, the subordination of social movements to party politics was beginning to change in the 2000’s through the emergence of alter-globalization movement in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> This movement has from the start encountered many difficulties to get out of the centralized structure of political organizations. In fact, the political culture, or simply the experience of social movements, is not often favorable to the idea of an open and horizontal space, in the service of movements. What made this movement different from those in Europe was the presence of professional chambers, Islamic organizations and more importantly the omnipresence of political ideologies. Nonetheless, Lelandais states that the subjects that alter-globalization movement defended, organization of campaigns, the flexibility and horizontality of its structures, absence of hierarchy made this movement in Turkey a space where the organizations, that had until then the monopoly of contestation with rigid organizations, had to cooperate with different profiles of activists and modes of organization. Because of this constant conflict between the far left activists and others, the far left ideologies did not have the main role in the movement. That is why we can consider the alter-globalization movement in Turkey as one of the first important attempts to disturb the symbiotic relationship between the social movements and partisan politics.

### ***TEKEL and Gezi***

TEKEL (2009) and Gezi (2013) movements are the two social movements which had a decisive impact on the social movement space by becoming reference points. These movements emerged in a context marked by the introduction of aggressive neo-liberal politics in Turkey. As noted by Jean-François Pérouse even though AKP claims to be a conservative party since its foundation in 2001, its conservatism is mainly focused on the preservation of socio-economic positions and the consolidation of values that justify, legitimate or hide these positions.<sup>18</sup> Uninterrupted since 1990, the application of neo-liberal politics is accelerated under the AKP rule whose policies are conceived according to an economical logic without taking into consideration or ignoring their social impacts.

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<sup>15</sup> Yıldırım K., *Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı ve Sendikacılık Hareketi Tarihi*, Istanbul, Kaynak Yayinlari, 2003, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Gülçin Erdi Lelandais, « Du printemps ouvrier à l’altermondialisme... Le champ militant et le champ politique en Turquie », *Cultures & Conflits*, été 2008, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Jean-François Pérouse, « Le « mouvement de Gezi » ou le choc des systèmes de valeurs environnementales dans la Turquie en croissance », *Méditerranée* [En ligne], 123 | 2014, pp. 49-56.

Emerged in 2009 in the Turkish capital of Ankara, TEKEL workers' movement represents a turning point in history the post-1980 labor movements in Turkey in terms of its mode of organization, mode of action and public and international support. TEKEL, which literally means monopoly in Turkish, was the state monopoly of tobacco and alcoholic beverages that was privatized later on and employed 12,000 workers in 21 cities across Turkey. Following the privatization, British-American Tobacco, the new owner of the tobacco branch of the monopoly, decided to sack thousands of workers in early 2009. Those who did not lose their jobs were offered a special status (4-C) which meant a reduction in monthly salary from 1,200 TL to 800 TL and 10 month contracts rather than 12 months with no guarantee of renewal. Workers decided to resist these decisions. They gathered in Ankara, occupied the streets around one of its central squares and lived in makeshift tents through the winter for 78 days, from 15 December 2009 to 2 March 2010. The traditional manufacturing industry worker, who also forms the backbone of the trade unions in Turkey, is cool-headed: he or she makes decisions following long consideration, is part of an organizational hierarchy, is disciplined, obeys the decisions taken, and knows how to sit at the negotiation table. These were observed among the TEKEL workers but there were also some new elements: the workers took decisions very rapidly, the resistance was part of a trade union, but they created a reciprocal relationship in which the workers changed the union as well. They took their decisions based on grassroots initiatives within the movement and although they maintained the formal organizational hierarchy of the trade union (Tek-Gıda İş – the Turkish Trade Union of Tobacco and Food Workers), all the protestors *potentially* became a spokesperson as well as an activist. During the occupation, people nearby brought food, medicine and clothing in order to support the workers' resistance. A common space was created in Ankara where ideologies and identity politics disappeared and an alternative micro-society where Muslim workers, most of whom voted AKP in the last elections, co-habited with leftist, nationalist or Kurdish workers.<sup>19</sup> This resistance resulted in a clear moral defeat for the government yet it was a very limited victory for the workers. TEKEL workers removed their tents following the decision of the Supreme Court to extend the TEKEL workers' official time limit to accept passing to 4-C status (which was one their demands).

The most remarkable social movement in the history of modern Turkey however took place in 2013, in a public park named Gezi. It is possible to observe many of the elements that we find in TEKEL workers' resistance such as the occupation of a public space, a pluralistic habitat, moral and symbolic defeat for the government along with a limited material victory and a high level of national and international legitimacy for the movement. The amplitude of the movement however was unprecedented in scale. It was initially triggered by a core group of protesters from the Chamber of architects and environmentalists who organized sit-ins and partly occupied the park in 27 May 2013. The park was one of the few remaining green spaces in central Istanbul and a project was underway to raze the park to build a shopping mall instead. After the first couple of days with clashes between the police and the protestors, the police withdrew and left the park and the neighboring Taksim Square which was occupied by protestors for more than two weeks. The social and political outburst generated by the occupation spread to 79 cities with at least 3.6 million active protesters countrywide.<sup>20</sup> Although a very unique movement, Gezi shares some characteristics with earlier civil insurrections that took place in the beginning of 2010s such as the Arab Spring,

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<sup>19</sup> Yalçın Bürkev « TEKEL direnişi: Ne Eskinin Basit Devamı Ne Yeninin Kendisi », *Tekel Direnişinin ışığında gelenekselden yeniye işçi sınıfı hareketi*, edited by Gökhan Bulut, Ankara, Notabene Yayınları, 2010. Metin Özügürlü, « The TEKEL resistance movement: Reminiscences on class struggle », *Capital & Class*, 35(2), 2011, pp. 179–187.

<sup>20</sup> «Emniyete gore, Gezi Parkı şüphelilerinin yüzde 78'i Alevi!», T24, 25 November 2013. URL: <http://t24.com.tr/haber/gezide-kac-eylem-gerceklesti-kac-kisi-goz-altina-alindi,244706>

Maidan protests in Ukraine, Occupy Wall Street in the United States. At least six of these characteristics can be described as: (1) they do not aim to claim an office of power; (2) unanimity is essential; (3) they organize without a leader, without a program and without a strategy; (4) they display non-violence as a tactic; (5) they ensure the equality among the protestors by rejecting hierarchy between them and (6) they occupy.

As a public square movement,<sup>21</sup> Gezi offered the citizens of Istanbul an alternative way of living where money, hierarchy and divisions based on ethnicity, socio-economical class and political preferences did not exist. It was above all a *radically pluralistic*<sup>22</sup> social movement that demanded a democratic society while at the same time experiencing it in the Gezi Park and the adjacent Taksim Square. It should be noted that although it is not possible to explain Gezi in terms of socio-economic class, the language and the cultural products of the movement show that some protesters had a high level of cultural capital. This means that the cultural capital did not represent a tool of domination but, on the contrary, was an instrument of interaction and sharing. In other words, *democracy was at the same time a demand and a way of life*<sup>23</sup> during this social movement. These public square movements can be considered as a reminder of the first principal of democracy: it is an open regime, the nature of which is to organize the pluralism of ways of being and living while constantly expanding the space of rights and liberties. They aim (according to the types of regimes that are contested) the establishment of a political order whose obligation is to allow each voice to be fully heard in the determination of the present and the future. In short, a form of political life that respects the demands of radical pluralism - in the sense that the criterion of judgment of public action would be the unconditional and absolute equality of citizens: an order of social relations where there are no trace of class, competence, origin or gender domination. This understanding of democracy means that each political act decided by the majority should also be aligned with an objective that do not affect the equality, liberty and dignity of the people. If we consider democracy only as the rule of the majority, we reduce it to a pure balance of power. On the contrary, making this principal the criterion of political action in all circumstances is wanting to radicalize it.

I argue that these social movements, explained above, reconfigure the social movement space and establish a new *situation*<sup>24</sup> or a *system of actions* in which specific *constraints* weigh on social movements that succeeds them. In the following pages, I will analyze four grassroots collectives while identifying these constraints. First I will present shortly these collectives and analyze their positions in the social movement space. Then I will look at their relative autonomy where I will illustrate the modalities at use when defining the frontiers of their action and/or identity in the space of social movements.

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<sup>21</sup>Nilüfer Göle, « Maidan : nouveau protagoniste du politique », in N. Göle, Y. Cohen (dir.), *La Démocratie de la place publique*, Paris, *Politika*, 2018.

<sup>22</sup>Albert Ogien, « La démocratie comme revendication et comme forme de vie », *Raisons politiques*, vol. 1, n° 57, 2015, pp. 31-47.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>A situation is a kind of envelope that cuts out a part of the social world and operates in the manner of a filter that selects, among all the constraints that weigh on individuals, those that have relevance in the here and now of the action in common. A circumscribed situation, in other words, is a world of intelligibility that is relatively defined. See Erving Goffman, « The Interaction Order », *American Sociological Review*, vol. 48, no 1, 1983, p. 1-17.

## Foundation of the collectives

Based in Taksim district, the Defense of Northern Forests (KOS) was founded just after the occupation of Gezi in July 2013 in forums (daily popular assemblies) that took place in public parks in the European side of Istanbul. As stated in the manifesto published in their web site<sup>25</sup> KOS “tries to bring together those who oppose the “creative destruction” of the capital in order to protect their habitat in their region and to ensure the transfer of the knowledge and the experience among the advocates of life” and it is “against to all kinds of unearned income through government tenders and “mega projects” such as the 3<sup>th</sup> airport, the 3<sup>th</sup> bridge, Kanal Istanbul (The Istanbul Canal), that menaces the ecosystem. In short KOS defends the collective life and states that they are in solidarity with all the people or organization that fight against the same issues.

Similar to KOS, Don Quixote Cycling Collective’s foundation goes back to the forums that were taking place, just after Gezi movement, at the Yoğurtçu Park in the Kadıköy district (Anatolian side of Istanbul). It is important to note this district is characterized by high concentration of activists and a high turnout votes for the parties in the opposition<sup>26</sup>. At these forums *Yeldeğirmeni Solidarity* was formed in order to established solidarity with the residents of Yeldeğirmeni neighborhood. This collective occupied a building that was not used in 20 years and transformed it in a common space and became the Don Quixote Occupation Home. A (physically and symbolically) more exclusive space than the neighborhood ‘forums’ in public spaces, Don Quixote Occupation Home was also organizing forums based on the same principals of KOS. The Don Quixote Cycling Collective was founded by four people who went regularly to the Occupation Home and who were opposed to the idea of squatting the building stating that they cannot take the responsibility of the squatters. These people were also opposed to having links with political parties. When the Don Quixote Occupation Home and its organizational structure begun to crumble, those who were interested in bicycles decided to found this collective in July 2015. The cycling collective is aimed to do activities that encourage, defend and make possible the use of bicycle. In its manifesto the activists state that they are not a modest collective that defends the idea affecting the society and the climate by their individual preferences. As The Don Quixote Cycling Collective they want to protect the common living spaces. According to them the bicycle has the potential to build up tight networks between various entities sharing similar concerns, and they aim to use this potential to create a critical body of activists and initiate a chain reaction<sup>27</sup>.

*Kadıköy City Solidarity* was also founded at the Don Quixote Occupation home by the resident of Kadıköy district. In December 2013, a group of activists who actively participated in forums came together and formed Neighborhoods Against Gentrification and in March 2014 they changed their name to The Kadıköy City Solidarity. In close coordination with other solidarities formed after Gezi, professional chambers (such as chamber of architects or city planners), academics and civil organizations, this collective considers the city as a common space and defends its social and ecological dimensions. Unlike the other collectives above, it is only open to those living in the neighborhood of Kadıköy.

Plaza Action Platform (PEP)<sup>28</sup> differs from others with the fact that its foundation precedes Gezi and do not mobilize for ecological causes. It was founded in 2008 in order to

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<sup>25</sup> <https://kuzeyormanlari.org/hakkinda/>

<sup>26</sup> According to the polling institute Konda, 13% of the protesters in Gezi lived in Kadıköy, while the district represents only 3.8% of the total population of Istanbul. [http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/KONDA\\_Gezi\\_Report.pdf](http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/KONDA_Gezi_Report.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> <https://donkisotbisikletkolektifi.org/manifesto/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://plazaeylem.org/pep-hakkinda/>



support the white-collar workers of IMB who were trying to unionize and to organize ‘plaza protests.’ Shortly after the TEKEL workers’ movement, it became a collective mobilization for the rights of white-collar workers. Unlike unions or profession organization, PEP aims specifically to minimize emotional isolation and loneliness that, according to PEP, are the principal and immediate backlashes of a white-collar job. Its objective is, on the one hand, to transform the problems of white-collar workers into public and political ones, gain legitimacy for its causes and on the other hand to propose an alternative to working life by strengthening the relations between white-collar workers, which are considered a political action by PEP activists.

### **The collectives and their place in the social movement space**

In the post-Gezi context of Istanbul, there were two principal categories (not taking into consideration the unions which are in a period of continuous decline since 2000s<sup>29</sup>): collectives and solidarities that were favorable to the inclusion of partisan politics by establishing connections with political parties or their members and those who were opposed to any organic link with party politics. The other category composes of collectives that hold on to their autonomy from partisan politics, which have an independent economic model, similar demands (highlighting the local, social and ecological issues) and similar social recruitment (in terms of high cultural and educational capital). The four collectives studied in this paper fall into this category. The position of each of them in the social movement space is defined by specific properties such as material resources, the number of members, history (legitimacy), ideological or philosophical inspiration, social profile of recruitment and degree of autonomy or heteronomy. Clarifying their positions allows us to identify the internal links (among collectives) and the external ones (links that they have with media, political actors etc.). This in turn contributes to understand the dynamics of this specific cluster in Istanbul’s social movement space.

Among the four groups, the Defense of the Northern Forests (KOS) seems to be the strongest in terms of material resources, number of members and public legitimacy. Its formation took place a few months after the occupation of the Gezi Park and it had to opportunity to capitalize on the public popularity and visibility of the movement. KOS has 40 active members, 100 subscribers in its Telegram discussion group, 59.000 followers on Twitter and 55.000 on Facebook. Among its active members there are journalists, photographers, radio programmers and editors who are capable of producing very competent editorial material in short notice to be shared with news agencies and in their social media platforms. There are also members from the chamber of architects and city planners, academics and independent researchers who actively collaborate with KOS in the preparation of reports, lawsuits and other similar material. KOS members are invited to national and international seminars related to urbanism and ecology and are interviewed in alternative media outlets. Their members are very well educated, socially and culturally competent but their personal income are low. Among the active members there are translators and freelancers whose cultural and economic capitals have an asymmetric relationship in which the economy is the lower component. Active members of KOS are dominantly male, aged between 27 and 50. Finally, KOS has an independent economic model in which there are 25 permanent donors and if necessary they can call on people to ask for money on the phone. On November 24, 2017, their budget was 7.1200 TL of which 820 TL was coming from

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<sup>29</sup> Isil Erdiñç, « Discrimination syndicale en Turquie », *Travail et Emploi* [En ligne], 146 | avril-juin 2016, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2018, consulté le 09 mars 2017, p.107.

permanent donors. It collaborates with municipalities in terms of logistics, such as demanding buses for their discovery or camping trips. Very recently KOS and the Don Quixote Cycling Collective decided to unite their economical sources in order to rent a collective space. But until this decision KOS had a space in İstiklal Street in the Beyoğlu neighborhood.

Don Quixote on the other hand have a smaller workforce (30 active members) but a higher degree of legitimacy especially in the Kadıköy. Environment activists from the neighborhood consult and invite the collective to join their ‘events’ in order to gain more visibility as well as legitimacy, knowing that with their participation, the event will be published in social media and in the local newspaper and will possibly attract other activists. Like KOS, Don Quixote gives interviews to alternative media outlets. Compared to KOS however, they are weaker in social media with 3.765 followers on Twitter and 2.000 on Facebook. Among the active members there are computer engineers and architects with high earning jobs while two of their active members, a freelance coder and a designer have precarious jobs. This collective is the youngest of all with members’ ages ranging from 27 to 40. The group is financed by its members and until recently they were doing their forums in a café in Kadıköy.

Kadıköy City Solidarity also has 30 active members. However, unlike others, they maintain a close relationship with the Kadıköy Municipality. They work closely with the municipality by offering their expertise in urban projects and thus have high degree of legitimacy in the district. Their member profile is well-educated, culturally competent and high income earner with members who are earn a living as a writer, engineer or architect. In terms of material sources, they finance themselves and do their forums in the Zeki Göker Cultural Center in Yeldeğirmeni, a neighborhood in Kadıköy.

All of the collectives above have relationships with legal, intellectual and media spheres: they work with professional chambers and with municipalities; they have members who produce academic research while trying to keep their distance from party politics. They have many multi-positioned members who circulate between different sites of collective action and types of organization such as Green Peace, environmental associations, professional chambers, feminist collectives and food cooperatives. KOS is slightly different from others since they have media professionals who cover their own news. They all have left-wing activists who make use of their relationships as well as their know-how.

Plaza Action Platform (PEP) has a different position from the ones mentioned above. First of all, they clearly manifest a left-wing ideology, promote unionization and have links with unions, which means that they are much closer to traditional politics. However, the context in which PEP emerged (TEKEL workers’ movement in 2009) also affected its mode of organization and strategy of action. PEP tries to counter their relative affinity to labor movement with the *strategy of distinction*. They define their zone of intervention not as ‘labor’ based but as a ‘psychological’ one, explaining that although white-collars are also workers, they do not sell their ‘labor’ but their ‘soul’ in exchange for money. PEP has 20 active members among which we find academics, translators, editors and freelancers. The youngest member is 28 and the oldest 55 is years old. Well-educated and culturally competent their members have, except three of them, precarious jobs. Its legitimacy comes from TEKEL and Call Center Workers’ movement. It has no presence in social media but is very active on its web-page, *plazaeylem.org*.

These collectives were founded in the same socio-political context (TEKEL and Gezi), their members have similar socio-economic profiles and they converge in their attitude towards party politics and forms of mobilization. Thus, they constitute a specific cluster in the social movement space where activists know each other and gather in same physical spaces exchanging their know-how and perceptions on their political activities. This cluster becomes also a zone of evaluation in which activists can measure and evaluate their respective

collectives and adopt new strategies if needed. For example, in the summer of 2018 Don Quixote and PEP founded a network of freelancers called ‘Those without an office’<sup>30</sup> in order to share their experiences and know-how as well as to eliminate the home-office isolation and to discuss better ways to increase freelance job offers. The foundation of “Those without an office” also points out certain conflicts between Don Quixote and PEP. The latter is criticized by the female members of the former as having members who have sexist attitudes towards women. Although they are very tightly-knit, KOS and Don Quixote also have certain tensions. Some of the members of Don Quixote prefer to carry out actions in KOS criticizing the hierarchy in the cycling collective.

### **Towards an autonomous social movement space in the post-Gezi period**

A social movement of great magnitude capable of having an impact over the government on its own, without the support of political parties (such as TEKEL workers’ resistance and Gezi) can contribute to the consolidation of the social movement space. In other words, it makes it possible to create a representation shared by many of its members to constitute a distinct universe and which, although distant from party politics, is nonetheless capable of influencing the course of the political or social life. By becoming substantial *points of reference*, according to which other mobilizations tend to elaborate their expectations and strategies these social movements can also contribute to *self-reference* of the social movement space that increases its autonomy. It is important to note that the interdependence that links the different movements is never fixed, but in constant evolution.

It is clear that, Gezi constitutes a point of reference for all the collectives discussed in the paper. The legitimacy that it acquired from citizens at national and international level, its capacity to mobilize social and mainstream media channels and the success of its creative repertoire of contention explain why after five years during which the government became more and more hegemonic in the political field and violent in repression of street demonstrations, these collectives maintain not only their activities in Istanbul but continue to elaborate their actions with similar strategies that we observed in Gezi; strong online presence by investing on social networks, ‘forum’ as the principal tool for internal organization, no allusion to political ideologies in their public statements, no links with party politics, slogans or posters, organizing a ‘zone defense’ on specific issues such as the destruction of the northern forests of Istanbul, the problems in the neighborhood of Kadıköy, the right to bike in a city that is very hostile to the bikes and the conditions of plaza workers. For example, the Don Quixote Cycling Collective is well aware of the attention that it gets from the media, but also from the public, when they see activists joining the street demonstrations with bikes<sup>31</sup>.

Although not using any ideological terms, these four collectives manifest anti-capitalist claims and, except PEP, all their demands are linked to environmental or urban issues resonating closely with Gezi. It is also interesting that the ‘zone defense’ was a term much used at the end of 1990s among the student collectives who were using the term ‘frontal organization’ (*cephhe örgütlenmesi*) in order to describe the ‘Coordination’ (Koordinasyon) that was meant to be a gathering of different political organizations (subordinated to political parties) in a single, flexible structure. Activists of PEP, most of whom were active in TEKEL workers’ resistance, establish also links between the latter and Gezi outlining their similarities. In short, Gezi especially serves as a model for and offers a positive social

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<sup>30</sup> <https://ofissizler.com/>

<sup>31</sup> We can describe this mode of action as similar to “paper demonstration” (manifestation de papier) that is aimed mainly to act on the representation that the public can make of the group through the press. Patrick Champagne, « La manifestation. La production de l'événement politique », in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 52-53, juin 1984. *Le travail politique*. pp. 19-41, p. 24.

movement narrative to these collectives who draw inspiration from its repertoire of action, of its 'frames' of expression of discontent and organizational forms all of which, according to activists, was a success.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Constitutional referendum of 2017***

The period of the constitutional referendum of 2017, which sought to implement a presidential system, was very useful in showing the ways in which different collectives establish links with party politics. The collectives that were closer to party politics after Gezi, formed a larger coalition called the 'No Assemblies' that carried out a campaign for the constitutional referendum of 2017. These auto-organized, local assemblies (which appeared in almost every neighborhood of Istanbul) organized neighborhood forums, printed posters and distributed leaflets in public space. During the campaign, the government and the ruling political party AKP were taken as direct adversaries. The arguments were about the undemocratic characteristics of the presidential system explaining how this system will affect the governance. Among the arguments were: "For Democracy, Vote No," "No to individual rule," "All the judiciary and control mechanisms will be administered by the President and those assigned by him. Will the judiciary be impartial according to you?"

While mentioning the undemocratic characteristics of the presidential system, all the collectives studied in this paper made declarations and street demonstrations under the slogans such as "The defenders of life say No," "The city and the nature say No" and highlighted the consequences of the presidential system on city planning and nature. Slightly different from KOS and Kadıköy City Solidarity, Don Quixote underlined in its declaration entitled "No to hierarchy" which claimed that no real social change can come from ballots and thus everyone should be constantly mobilized in order to have an impact on politics. PEP on the other hand did a declaration in which they listed their social and economic claims to improve the life of white-collars by adding "No" at the beginning of each phrase, such as "No! We want our rights not the impossible."

Although these dynamics show the relative autonomy of the collectives it is also important to point out that this characteristic is not always crystal clear as these groups sometimes have close relationships with municipalities and professional chambers whereas some of their members come from traditional party hierarchies (leftists and secular nationalists) after a period of disappointment. Members from the Kadıköy City Solidarity for example were clearly disturbed by the (pro-Kurdish) HDP's ecology commission<sup>33</sup> who tried to approach the group. This cannot be only explained with the desire of remaining detached from party politics but rather indicates a nationalist vein that is opposed to the existence of a pro-Kurdish party.

The rejection of party politics can also be read as the accumulation of fame, legitimacy and strategy of distinction through criticism of institutional politics and of activist groups that work with political parties, as the first stage of a career within political institutions. For example, KOS and Don Quixote recently published an "election manifesto" for the local elections of 31 March 2019 in which where they invited the candidates to publicly declare their positions about the Northern Forests of Istanbul as well as city planning while highlighting that they are a supra political organization. Ekrem Imamoğlu, the mayoral candidate for Istanbul of the main opposition party (CHP), published a short video explaining his approach concerning these issues. There was also a member of KOS who was an independent candidate for the Mayor of Istanbul. These links with the main opposition party

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<sup>32</sup> Meyer (D. S.), Whittier (N.), « Social Movement Spillover », *Social Problems*, 41 (2), 1994. McAdam (D.), « Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency », *American Sociological Review*, 48, 1983.

<sup>33</sup> <http://hdpekoloji.org/>

indicates that the claim for autonomy as a core principal can considerably change according to the political context and the evolution of the collectives in question.

In following part, I will analyze the representations and perception of the actors along with the modalities of actions and internal organization in order to illustrate links between the modalities of actions and subjective dimension.

### **Pragmatic and subjective dimensions of the social movement space**

The subjective dimension deals with representations and perceptions of actors and the pragmatic dimension are related to the concrete modalities of accomplishment of the action. Cognitive or subjective, skills are a set of knowledge and perception schemes specific to collective action. They allow the actors to orient themselves within the space by the mastery of the language and the principles of classification that make it possible to distinguish the different nuances of traditions or currents in presence. This informs and nourishes the practice by anticipating the opponents' move in a given action.

The current unfavorable context for social movements (that oppose the government) have visible effects on the pragmatic dimensions especially on the choice of repertoires of action and on claims. Since gaining legitimacy with public demonstrations is no longer a viable option in Turkey, almost all the actors in the social movement space prefer small-scale actions in public spaces such as making public press declarations and choose to aim at more immediate goals in local levels. KOS, in addition to the briefings, organize 'discovery' trips that consist of going to nearby villages, or sites under construction (construction yard of the 3th airport for example) take photos, talks to the inhabitants of villages in order to evaluate if there is a potential opposition. If they see a potential, they regularly visit the village and try to create a self-functioning organization which empowers the villagers and gives them the know-how for standalone protest capabilities. All the while KOS continues to support the villagers. KOS also functions as a pressure group. Recently they managed to convince a multinational company that to invest in the construction of the 3th airport would not be economically beneficial for them. This was made possible by a tremendous work of documenting, researching and contacting the companies or institutions that are willing to listen the reports of the activists. This close relationship with the residents and their success in their mobilization contributed them to develop close ties with three municipalities in Istanbul (two of them were under AKP) which sometimes consult them on issues about construction.

Kadıköy City Solidarity operates in a similar way: they mobilize the residents of the Kadıköy neighborhood to apply pressure and participate in municipality's urban planning. It makes it much easier for the Kadıköy City Solidarity to organize collective action since Kadıköy is one of the principal neighborhoods where the main opposition party is much stronger than that of the government. Like KOS, Don Quixote organizes city biking trips in order to recruit and promote the use of bicycle as well as to organize public forums in public space. KOS, Don Quixote and PEP also regularly organize workshops in which specialists from different domains are invited to discuss biking (and its political and socio-economic dimensions), ecology or white-collar workers (and for example their migration). PEP is known among the activists and white-collars through their web-site *istenatildim.org* ("I am fired" in Turkish), launched in 2014, where they give legal advice to people who were fired abruptly and, through their "Experience sharing workshops" organized since 2011. The latter is announced in their web site along with an invitation to white-collars working in banks, insurance and finance companies. These workshops are organized around different thematics such as "the evaluation of work based on performance," "job interviews," "discrimination," "mobbing," and their reports are published on PEP's website.

However, Gezi also had a decisive effect on the repertoire of action, on the question of which cause to defend and on internal organization. For example, KOS did a public demonstration in Istanbul on 23 September 2013 in which they wore tree costumes that they prepared from pruned trees. More like a public artistic performance than a traditional public demonstration, this protest increased the visibility of KOS who gained public support. In a similar way, the choice of joining a protest by bikes can also be seen as a product of the post-Gezi period in which the actors were obliged to discover more creative ways of protesting. Kadıköy City Solidarity's ability to put pressure on the municipality is also unthinkable without the impact of Gezi in this neighborhood. The post-Gezi period saw the occupation of two buildings and two solidarities were founded which organized weekly meetings, workshops and various other events. This contributed to the mobilization of these two Kadıköy neighborhoods (Yeldeğirmeni and Caferağa) in which the solidarities were founded, to gain legitimacy and public support. From the Yeldeğirmeni Solidarity, Don Quixote Cycling Collective and Kadıköy City Solidarity were born. Likewise, PEP gained new members and better visibility among the white-collar workers who joined the collective after Gezi. All the collectives privilege direct and local action according to their 'zone of defense' that consists, except PEP, on environmental and urban claims, highlighting 'the defense of collective life zones', as it was the case in Gezi.

In terms of internal organization, the collectives adopt similar principals that we observed in Gezi movement: (1) unanimity is essential; (2) they organize without a leader, without a political program and (3) they ensure the equality among the protestors by rejecting a hierarchy. All of them use the 'forum' as the principal tool for decision-making and recruitment. Forum is open to everyone and anyone who participates in the decision making votes have the equal right and equal freedom of expression. It should also be noted that the practice of 'forum' precedes Gezi. This mode of organization was also practiced by students' collectives in the late 1990s, especially after a protest. The 'Coordination' group, which was an assembly of different political organizations and students' collectives (subordinated to political parties) in a single, flexible structure in order to prevent the monopolization of the student movement by political parties, also practiced the forum. However, it became a part of a dissident's everyday life after Gezi and was organized in many neighborhoods of Istanbul. Furthermore, PEP and KOS' co-founders are from the student's coordination group while the founders, and active members of Don Quixote and Kadıköy City Solidarity are former experienced leftist activists who left their political organization by a strong feeling of disappointment, which explain their attitudes towards traditional parties and its modes of organization.

It is clear that, the members of these collectives represent a section of the Turkish middle-class who feel unrepresented, unheard and despised by a government which engages in very aggressive policies against all political opposition (social movements and political parties alike) while offending the former secular elite in almost all public statements. Very recently, the government filed a lawsuit against 16 people who are the "alleged" leaders of the Gezi movement which, according to the indictment, is an insurrection financed and organized by specific national and international actors who aimed at the "dissolution of the Turkish Republic."<sup>34</sup>

In this authoritarian socio-political context, it was remarkable to observe that activists of these collectives were hopeful and very much integrated to the social life of the city with many other dissident projects in mind. When I asked them why they were involved in these collectives, almost all of them stated that if they weren't a part of these groups, they would

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/374096/gezi-iddianamesi-16-kisiye-agirlastirilmis-muebbet-istemi>

simply become depressed. In fact, all of these activist practices are symbolically and socially very rewarding: their social life are nourished by collective action and the pessimism or desperation that is characteristic of the politically active Turkish middle-class and of the left-wing in particular is replaced by an energetic optimism. This also explains why most of them are full-time activists who have centered their life on their respective struggles. This, however, does not mean that there are no interpersonal and political tensions. Informal and organic hierarchies are formed between the members based on experience, gender and socio-economical class or some political parties are preferred over others in an informal and undisclosed manner. However the internal constraints of the social movement space in the post-Gezi period, promotes 'democratic' and 'radically pluralistic' internal functioning as well as an absence of ideological categorization. This, at least on a micro level, makes it possible, for actors to evaluate and correct their attitudes and actions according to these constraints and try to reject any kind of domination based on class, competence, origin or gender in the social movement space.

### Thoughts on conclusion

Although these collectives have their own characteristics, in terms of internal organization, structural features and exterior relationships, their actions are directed towards social change in a limited local context. They form a social movement space that is relatively autonomous from the political field and because of the internal constraints of this space (which can be described as *radically pluralistic*) the individuals who compose it try to establish an order of social relations where, ideally, a domination based on class, competence, origin or gender will not exist.

They refuse to recognize the government as a direct adversary, do not engage in party politics and conceive their agency as a means of social change from below rather than presenting explicit tools to change the current political system. As argued in this paper, not taking the current government as an adversary does not mean that these collectives are indifferent to institutional politics. In fact, all four collectives mentioned in this paper aim to change policies which, according to them, seek to create a monopoly of economic, cultural and social power for the governing political party. Yet, as mentioned earlier, they practice their agency and form their expectations relatively independent of political parties and are explicit about the fact that the authoritarianism of AKP is scarcely a new phenomenon in Turkey.

This paper argued that the relative autonomy and radically pluralistic mode of organization constitute the *internal constraints* of the social movement space of Istanbul which has been in a process of reconfiguration since the emergence of the alter-globalization movement in Turkey. This process reached a new climax with the Gezi movement in 2013. These constraints shape their expectations and conceptions of their actions as well as the internal life of the collectives. This, in turn, increases the agency of their activists and thus motivates them to create or sustain alternative spaces (or collectives) that become *spaces of political socialization*. Their ability and power to create forms of social and political engagement that is not confined to the overarching bipartisan discourse creates its own *political opportunities*<sup>35</sup> to challenge repression and social engineering at least on a local level.

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<sup>35</sup> William Gamson, David S. Meyer, « Framing Political Opportunity », in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald (eds), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements. Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 276.