

OccupyGezi as (an) Intertopian Space

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Istanbul's city center witnessed the violent clearing of a small group of protesters from Gezi Park by the police on May 30, 2013. The protests were against a governmental decree that aimed to replace the park with an Ottoman-style army barracks containing a luxurious shopping mall. By intervening in the form of setting protesters' tents on fire and excessively using tear gas, the state denied its citizens' right to protest. These were perceived as further evidence of an administration that was increasingly characterized by corruption, authoritarianism, and government control. Government's tough stance triggered a wave of anti-government demonstrations; soon, the protests spread across the country and Gezi no longer only referred to just an Istanbul park. Within a couple weeks, the movement symbolized the demand for a democratic and peaceful Turkey. In the following days, police forces intensified their violent crackdown on protesters. Seven protesters were killed, dozens were injured, and hundreds were illegitimately taken into custody by the police. The mainstream Turkish media deliberately ignored the news. This triggered further protests. Thousands of white collar workers and business people gathered in front of NTV, a national news channel, and protested the popular TV channels for submitting to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who micromanaged the news on Gezi Park, instead of following the basic principles and ethics of news making. People from all walks of life including blue and white collar workers, women, LGBTIs, Alevis, Kurds, Turkish nationalists, and anti-capitalist Muslims continued to raise

their voices on the streets. The protests swept the country for the following three weeks and have intermittently continued since then. A unique moment that would influence the future of Turkish society in distinct ways was being experienced.

Around the first anniversary of the Gezi resistance, film director Mustafa Altıoklar emerged on social media to promote his new film project, a love story blazing up at the barricades during the most heated times of the Gezi protests. Framing the film as a docudrama based on real events, Altıoklar and his producer initiated a crowdfunding campaign on indiegogo.com with a target of 500,000 USD (out of 1,000,000 USD total budget). The project's description told potential contributors, "The Gezi spirit was all about community, getting together, contributing from one self, supporting each other—crowd funding is the only way to do this film."¹ Renowned with his close ties to the main oppositional party CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or the Republican People's Party), Altıoklar arguably represented a particular constituent of the Gezi movement, and he was therefore criticized by others for perpetuating Kemalist, militarist discourse on social media during OccupyGezi. As Altıoklar's indiegogo campaign circulated on social media, several critics picked his tapping on the communal nature of Gezi resistance as a stepping stone for the online financing of his media project. Film critic and columnist Necati Sönmez wrote on social media, for instance, that "it is terrible [for Altıoklar] to execute such a campaign and present his film, which seems to entertain his own taste only, as if it is a collective work of Gezi. Furthermore, we are not fine with the names of Ali İsmail and Ethem [citizens who were killed by the police during the protests] being used in such miserable work by such a sordid man!"² Others interpreted Altıoklar's film and its campaign as an effort to liquidate the social currency of the Gezi spirit embodied by the beaming collective resistance all around the country.

Leaving Altıoklar's personal or artistic motivations outside of the picture and setting the growing literature on social and political ends achieved through crowdfunding campaigns aside, we note that these debates bring out an untouched façade of the Gezi resistance: the assumption that OccupyGezi was purely outside of market economy and free from the conflicts dragged by capitalist mode of political organization. Gezi as a discursive space was widely imagined as liberated from market relationships. This has been a sweet yet susceptible dream to be shattered by hasty efforts, like Altıoklar's, to re-signify and re-appropriate, thus homogenize Gezi's symbols. Our aim here is not to suggest that OccupyGezi is a mere extension of capitalist inequality. Neither is it to

undermine the political potentials of a scintillating resistance that has already paid irreversible prices. We propose that OccupyGezi was neither market-bound nor purely liberatory in essence and that it was essentially an intertopian space.

The romanticization of resistance was one of the hallmarks of OccupyGezi movement. Taking place both during and after the resistance itself, this attitude toward the movement has been manifested through hashtags such as *geziyiunutma* (don'tforgetgezi) and *geziyihatırlat* (remembergezi) even several weeks after the closing of the park, through social media posts that collectively romanticized the movement through conversation, and through face-to-face recounting of the events. "The Gezi spirit" circulated in discourse and created "a timeless, placeless zone," in Maurice Bloch's terms, to the effect that it was disposed almost as a taboo that could not be questioned and needed to be cherished through its assigned labels, such as fraternity. Also, such romanticization was often with reference to the idealization of pure left figures such as Marx and Engels, the communist utopia, and the Soviet ethic. The romanticization of OccupyGezi had at its core the belief that the park and its vicinity, and every site of resistance in the country around the same time, was free of hierarchies and market relationships. Adding to this idealization of the resistance space was the communal market set up in the park, and the constant donation of both material and immaterial help offered by the citizens. Therefore, it was possible to subdue the citizen-consumer identities and instead reclaim the *citizen* and *the people* identities.

However, triangulated empirical evidence and experience tells a different story. Gezi Park and its spirit were not and could not be free of market relationships. First of all, there were still vendors that sold a variety of items ranging from foodstuffs such as popcorn, meatballs, watermelon, water, tea, and beer to other items such as tissues and toilet paper. The impossibility of providing free food for everyone was due, in part, simply to the high number of people involved in the protests. Although free food and drink were distributed at certain times, others felt hungry and or thirsty at other times, causing the vendors to profit from this. Moreover, as one approached the park, the prices for such items increased, even for the gas masks which were necessary in order to breathe and survive. The relationship between vendors and Gezi protesters thus operated as a market economy. Although these exchanges did not de-legitimize the helpful and "one for all, all for one" discourse, the market system was not wiped out completely or even temporarily.

On the second level, OccupyGezi, while it was still taking place, was co-opted and offered to the white-collars as a consumable lifestyle, political position, and spectacle. Several commercials that appropriated OccupyGezi's slogans and symbols soon began appearing on television. Moreover, even the Istanbul municipality advertised its new subway stations with a slogan that contained a direct reference to one of the most popular slogans of the Gezi movement: "Metro to everywhere, everywhere metro!" ("Everywhere Taksim, resistance everywhere!"). Resonating with the debate in the consumer culture theory literature, whether it is possible to escape the market or whether our attempts to break away from it are increasingly co-opted, the events unfolded in such a fashion that placed OccupyGezi within neither the market-bound enslavement perspective³ nor within the liberatory perspective⁴. The market-bound perspective holds that enslavement is a by-product of the logic of the market-system. The liberatory perspective holds that consumption provides an array of meaning for people and that it can actually be empowering if the consumers use their agency to seek for the outside of market place.

The third level involved the rumbles of the nation-state composition as a reflection of the capitalist mode of political organization. Gezi was imagined and circulated in discourse as a space free from the existing conflicts between different identities, such as that Kurds, Alevis, nationalists, and anti-capitalist Muslims who instead united against the authoritarian government. Ethnographic data demonstrates, however, that identity conflicts embedded within the nation-state were sustained in Gezi and throughout the subsequent discourse on the movement. Several instances of discrimination against Kurds and Kurdish language were observed during the resistance. For instance, the question of where the Kurds were located in the park and protests became popular in vernacular discourse and social media. This question can be read to be an extension of the ever-lasting perception that non-normative identities are parasitic on the Turkish nation and its gains. Although these observations do not negate several other instances and the performatively unifying discourse of resistance, a smooth construction of togetherness in the Gezi Park would be misleading.

In these aspects, OccupyGezi is quite similar to Burning Man.⁵ Like OccupyGezi, the spaces of Burning Man are constituted as markets, and it fails to imagine a system outside of the market. Burning Man was created as an experimental event that sought to temporarily remedy the ills of the society "whose economic and technological dynamic attributes and

intrudes upon the integrity of the cultural process”⁶ became more of a spectacle over time. In a way, what started as an alternative anti-market event at a beach in California, marked by the burning of an effigy at the end of the event, evolved into a space that both contained and, to a certain degree, replicated the principles of markets as we know them. Over time, as the number of participants increased, it evolved into an event that no longer took place at the beach but was moved to the desert in Nevada, now accessible by a \$380 ticket. The growing size of attendants and the size of the effigy indicate its spectacle consumable nature. The organization committee now compares it to other events like the Glastonbury, Coachella, and the Electric Daisy Carnival.⁷ According to Kozinets, “practices used at Burning Man to distance consumers from the market include discourses supporting communality and disparaging market logics, alternative exchange practices, and positioning consumption as self-expressive art.”⁸ We argue here that once the protest or the alternative space is consumed as spectacle, it is placed in a perpetual cycle of co-optation, rendering the site of protest constantly in flux between capitalism and its alternatives.

Consumer culture scholars maintain that markets have a totalizing influence and that they affect both consumer communities and individual consumers.⁹ It is argued that markets cause the fragmentation of consumer into isolated groups (ibid) and undermine community spirit and practice.¹⁰ Markets are also held responsible for pacifying consumers into less expressive beings.¹¹ The liberatory perspective in consumer culture studies, although also viewing the market as a dominating realm, argues that consumers have agency to resist the market structures in a way that empowers them. This, they argue, will be made possible by an emancipatory space for consumer resistance outside the market system. On the other hand, the market-bound perspective in consumer culture maintains that consumers “subtly and skillfully use consumption in everyday life to challenge the status quo and the dominant market ideologies.”¹² However, the findings of this stream of research suggest that “consumers cannot be completely emancipated from the encapsulating logic of the market. On the contrary, even the choice of what is to be resisted or the form in which this resistance should be expressed conveys a desire for social distinction from nonresistant consumers (e.g., shopping at Whole Foods, buying organics, and carrying a reusable canvas shopping bag quickly become signs of social distinction and cultural capital). From this perspective, such politics of distinction subject activist consumers to the same dominating market logics that they seek to evade; hence this perspective is labeled “market-bound.”¹³

We propose a framework that captures both the market-bound and the liberatory perspectives is the conceptualization of consumptionscapes as intertopian. Having been used in the literary criticism and film studies literatures¹⁴, intertopia describes a place which has both utopian and dystopian qualities, resonating with the market-bound versus outside of market possibilities. The neo-liberal existence, and attempts to break away from it, are in constant flux, displaying properties of both utopia and dystopia, rendering this space intertopian. In film studies, intertopia has been used as “a place... This is a place very much like the 20th century where one could observe the wrong practices of the state, social and economic differences and is also a place where dramatic things happen. However this place encloses hope.”¹⁵ As noted by Harvey, what Hayek and similar thinkers had envisioned for the neo-liberal marketplace rested on utopia rested on individual freedom instead of equality, however, in practice, the neo-liberal marketplace displays elements of dystopia such as re-creation of new the new wealthy that sustains itself on the poor getting poorer through the re-distribution of resources.¹⁶

Utopia,¹⁷ *no space* in Greek, can be tied into to the liberatory perspective¹⁸ and dystopia, a word used in English for the first time by John Stuart Mill in the English Parliament in 1868, bad space in Greek, can be tied into the manipulation and enslavement perspective.¹⁹ According to Suvin, in contemporary literary studies, utopia is re-interpreted as “being any overstepping of the boundaries given to men, hence a quality inherent in all creative thought and action,”²⁰ which strictly resonates with the liberatory perspective of consumption and resistance. While it does not have the specific aim of escaping or defeating the market, or of becoming a craft consumer, it still contains the essence of critical awareness that previous literature deemed resistance. Dystopia, on the other hand, is characterized by hopelessness, similar to the accounts of critique of consumption by what is now termed the market-bound/enslavement perspective.²¹ Stroe defined intertopian as “the place between places, the threshold between the Old World (which is nature-unfriendly, man’s products being artificial, non-natural) and the New emerging Ecotopian World...”²² One goal of this study is to question the idea that everyday practices of resistance belong to static or binary categories such as market bound and liberatory and ask instead how resistance is sustained and coexists with consumption within a heterodox consumptionscape defined as the place between places, similar to Stroe.²³

Gezi as an intertopian place also resonates with anthropologist Victor Turner's seminal work on ritual. Extrapolating from Arnold van Gennep's concept of *rite de passage*, Turner writes that as societies move from one state of being to another through rituals they undergo an unusual existence marked by equality, statuslessness, and togetherness. Turner calls this "betwixt and between"²⁴ state liminal, an interstructural situation. In liminality individuals are neither here nor there in relation to their respective societal hierarchies; they experience a feeling of comradeship, in Turner's words, a moment of *communitas*, which is simply being stripped of social and political statuses. By its very nature of being interstructural, liminality is antistructure, as it constitutes a space against what is norm in a society that is being hierarchical. Turner argues that once the process is completed, the society goes back to structure and maintains its hierarchical nature, which, in fact, gets strengthened by the temporary experience and imagination of equality, statuslessness, and togetherness. The important point is that antistructure never negates structure. They contain each other within each other. Yet if one can emerge through the interstructural liminal space to convey the capacity to be free from societal roles and norms into the structure, the *communitas* moment then becomes less of a collectively bought illusion of antistructure.

The OccupyGezi movement created a unique, historic moment through which masses from all walks of life in Turkey rejoined a call to unite against what concretized as a totalizing, corrupt, and conservative power vacuum. During and after the protests, the assumption that OccupyGezi operated purely outside of a market economy and free from the conflicts of the capitalist mode of political organization was widespread in the discourse about this historic moment. We have argued that OccupyGezi was neither market-bound nor purely liberatory in essence and proposed that it should be approached as an intertopian space. This captures both the market-bound and the liberatory perspectives. Being in constant flux and displaying properties of utopia and dystopia simultaneously, neo-liberal existence is intertopian by nature. The important task that lingers both politically and analytically is to distill a reflexive capacity in and about the Gezi experience. As much as the subjects of protests--say, business people raising their voice in front of NTV—translate their critical take on media, politics, and markets to other contexts and much later OccupyGezi loses its fever, only then the political use of an intertopian space (and of noting it as an analytical category) is meaningful. Only then, will the fragile dream still live on.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/occupygezi-joingezipride>
- 2 <http://www.kadrajsinema.com/mustafa-altioklarin-gezi-belgeseli-tartirma-yaratti/>
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin, [1867] 1976); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception" in *The consumer society reader*, ed. J.B. Schor and D.B. Holt (New York: New Press [1944] 2000), 3–19.
- 4 Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (London: Routledge [1979] 1996); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh, "Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* (1995): 239-267.
- 5 See Robert V. Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June 2002): 20-38.
- 6 Larry Harvey, "Larry Harvey's Burning Man '97 Speech," (delivered in Hualapai Playa, NV, August 30, 1997).
- 7 http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/ticketprices.html
- 8 Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market?" 20.
- 9 Firat and Venkatesh, "Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption," 239-267.
- 10 Kozinets, "Can Consumers Escape the Market?" 20-38.
- 11 See Firat and Venkatesh, "Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption," 239-267.
- 12 Elif Izberk-Bilgin "An Interdisciplinary review of Resistance to Consumption, Some Marketing Interpretations, and Future Research Suggestions," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 13 (September 2010), 313.
- 13 Izberk-Bilgin "An Interdisciplinary review of Resistance to Consumption, Some Marketing Interpretations, and Future Research

- Suggestions," 313.
- 14 Didem Durak-Akser, "*The Intertopian Elements in Terry Gilliam's Brazil*" (MA Diss., Kadir Has University, 2014).
 - 15 Didem Durak-Akser, "*The Intertopian Elements in Terry Gilliam's Brazil*" (MA Diss., Kadir Has University, 2014).
 - 16 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 - 17 Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: A. Murray & Son, 1869).
 - 18 e.g. See Firat and Venkatesh, "Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption."
 - 19 e.g. Robert Bocock, *Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 - 20 Darko Suvin., "Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as a Key to Utopian Studies," *Utopian Studies*, 1.2 (1990): 39.
 - 21 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).
 - 22 Mihai Stroe, "Ernest Callenbach's Intertopia and the Quest for Deep Time: ecotopian paths to natural philosophy, native american wisdom and the high romantic republic," *University of Bucharest Review-A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* 1 (2009), 57.
 - 23 Stroe, "'Ernest Callenbach's Intertopia and the Quest for Deep Time,'" 56-66.
 - 24 Victor Turner, "Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage," in *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of the Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 46.

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