INTRODUCTION

The first spark for Egypt’s 2011 revolution was lit when over 50,000 protesters occupied Cairo’s Tahrir square on January 25th. Over the course of 18 days, which resulted in President Mubarak’s removal from power, Tahrir square became the focal point of the revolution. It housed not only the democracy demonstrations, but also jovial celebrations after the fall of Mubarak. A little more than 6 months later, on September 17, a protest movement began in Zucotti Park, located in New York’s Wall Street financial district. The protesters of different backgrounds and with a rather nebulous agenda, came together to stand firm against social and economic inequality, high unemployment, corruption, the negative influence of big corporations on the democratic process, and the absence of legal repercussions for the financial actors behind the recent global economic crisis. At the center of the Occupy movement was the Zucotti Park, where every evening at seven o’clock a general assembly was held in which the logistical and executive decisions of the movement were made. In addition to hosting the general assembly and the day-to-day protest activities of the movement, Zucotti Park housed each night somewhere between 100 and 200 people prior to being closed to overnight use. Occupy Wall Street inspired occupy movements in over 95 cities across 82 countries.


2 The protesters at Zucotti Park “set up a kitchen, for serving food, a legal desk and a sanitation department, a library of donated books, an area where general assembly meets, a medical station, a media center where people can recharge their laptops using portable generators, and even a general store, called the comfort center, stocked with donated clothing, bedding, toothpaste and deodorant – like the food, all free for the taking.” Michael Kimmelman, “In Protest the Power of Place”, in The New York Times, October 15, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/sunday-review/wall-street-protest-shows-power-of-place.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (Accessed 7/24/2013)
The latest wave of Occupy movements emerged in Istanbul. On May 31, 2013, police officers tried to forcibly remove a small group of protesters from a neighborhood park by employing pepper spray, creating a nation-wide backlash. The group had been keeping watch in the park since May 27th trying to prevent Gezi Park, one of the few remaining green spaces in the heart of the city, from being demolished in order to make room for an Ottoman-inspired shopping mall. As the news of police brutality spread through social media, thousands of protesters took to the streets reclaiming in less than a day both the park and the adjacent Taksim Square. Until being violently dispersed by the police forces on June 15th, hundreds of protesters set up an encampment in Gezi Park. During this time, Gezi Park served as not only the headquarters of government protests, but as a commune. Volunteers set up soup kitchens, medical stations, a children’s playground, and even a public library. There were public discussions, free classes, workshops, public plays and impromptu concerts.

A wave of revolutions, mass demonstrations have swept the world since 2011. Should this process be understood as a “revolutionary moment” – moment in the sense of both fleeting, effervescent, momentary and but also a “turning point”, a “catalyst” for world-wide resistance, upheaval, transformation and change? While each of the sites and countries in which these protests have taken place are significantly different from one another, with their unique histories and stories, can we even call attention to the factors that link these events? Is there a “dominant global image,” that links these distinct moments, these widely different movements? In this essay, I argue that if glimpse of such a “world picture” is to be found, it is to be discovered in the public space – Zucotti Park, Tahrir Square, Gezi Park. In this sense, the short twenty-first century has surely been an Arendtian one. Observers of these social movements reflect on their radical, participatory nature heralding them as the quintessential instances of direct democracy. For Arendt scholars, they present a particularly interesting challenge of rethinking the relationship between revolution and the public space.

In this essay, I argue that if glimpse of such a “world picture” is to be found, it is to be discovered in the public space – Zucotti Park, Tahrir Square, Gezi Park. In this sense, the short twenty-first century has surely been an Arendtian one. Observers of these social movements reflect on their radical, participatory nature heralding them as the quintessential instances of direct democracy. For Arendt scholars, they present a particularly interesting challenge of rethinking the relationship between revolution and the public space. In this article, I analyze the role of the “public” in the light of these demonstrations. On the one hand, I use the Arendtian conception of the public space as a sphere of appearance to analyze the role and significance of the actual physical locations of Tahrir Square, Zucotti Park, and Gezi Park. The contention is that space matters, particularly as public spaces become political spaces in the context of Occupy movements. Arendt’s concept of the public space, is therefore, more relevant than ever in order to understand the dynamics behind the creation of a political power that initiates, defines and shapes democratic politics. On the other hand, I re-evaluate the role of the public in Arendt’s work with respect to these movements.

While Arendt’s concept of the public has been rightly applied to the constituents of a liberal

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5 Of course, this is not to deny the individual, unique features of each and every one of these movements. Take Gezi protests for example. When the protests started and in a matter of days became widespread and very popular, analysts drew attention to the similarities between the protests and the May 68 youth protests in France, the Arab Spring and other occupy movements. While Gezi Protests share commonalities with each of these popular movements, it remains unique. Gole reminds us that while like in France, most of the protesters were young, the Gezi protests were not simply a case of intergenerational conflict. Parents joined their children in the park to protest with them. Also, while the popular anger toward the current government was voiced fervently in both Gezi and Tahrir, these protests in fact took place in widely different political regimes, a parliamentary democracy versus an authoritarian dictatorship. Gole, Nilüfer, “Gezi – Anatomy of a Public Square Movement,” Insight Turkey vol.15 (3), 2013, pp. 7-14, 8-9. However, as we shall examine later, the widely different contexts in which these movements took place does not preclude us from analyzing their commonalities – particularly with regards to the function and role of the public space.
democratic state, I argue that these contemporary movements lend credibility to a reading of Arendt’s public as an actual, physical location which allows members of a community to come together and act in concert to bring about social, political and economic change.

ARENDT ON PUBLIC SPACE
One of the distinguishing features of Arendt’s thought is her ability to conceive a realm of politics that transcends the traditional liberal understanding. In a time when the Western politics is bogged down by bureaucratic proceduralism in the spotlight and backroom negotiating between elites off stage, Arendt’s vision of political action offers us an alternative that can re-integrate ordinary citizens into the political processes.

In my brief recapitulation of Arendtian public space, I would like to draw particular attention to four features that are relevant for analyzing the recent social protests in public squares. The first of these features is the acting, coming together of individuals in the public space augmented by the physical proximity, which makes the location itself an important actor in Arendt’s political theory. The second is the speech and action through which individuals reveal themselves to one another. As a consequence symbols, signs and other forms of communication that take place in the public space carry significant import. The third feature is the leaderless quality of such activity in the public realm. Power, according to Arendt is generated only through a community of equal and distinct participants. Leaders play perhaps a minute role limited solely to the beginning of the activity. The final feature is the effervescent, fleeting nature of the power generated by such action and the resulting difficulty in bringing about lasting, durable transformation in the social and political institutions of society.

In her *The Human Condition*, Arendt characterizes the public space as a “space of appearance.” It is a space “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly.” In this public space, individuals disclose themselves to one another. This is the confirmation of human plurality, which according to Arendt is one of the main conditions of human existence. For Arendt, the commitment to human plurality is an ontological position. It affirms on the one hand the equality of the participants in the community but also their uniqueness. If human beings were not equal, they would not be able to understand one another, share this world in common with others. But they are also distinct individuals in that they need communication (speech and action) in order to make themselves understood, in order to reveal to others their unique thoughts, feelings, plans, and promises. Human beings are such that “nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives or will live.”

While each individual discloses their whoness to the others through speech and action, “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them.” Action, therefore, needs the public (both in the sense of a

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7 Arendt herself refuses to explore the human nature, a question that she considers both psychologically and philosophically “unanswerable,” and instead examines the human condition with the caveat that the “conditions of human existence – life itself, natality, mortality, worldliness, plurality, and earth – can never ‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 11.


multiplicity of actors and a space). “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world.”

“Arendt tells us that “willingness to act and speak at all” is an act of courage, not in the sense of heroism, “a willingness to suffer the consequences”, but an ordinary, everyday kind of courage that is revealed in one’s decision “in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self.” Action, therefore, is very much related to the public space and the willingness to step into its light. “Action…is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others.”

In order to clarify this notion of action, Arendt in her usual style, takes us along into an inquiry into the etymology of the word “action.” In our current parlance, we seem to attribute “action” as a quality to the “strong man,” who by virtue of either intellectual excellence or pure physical force stands out among the impotence and inactivity of the crowd. Both in Latin and Greek however, Arendt reminds us, the action seems to be divided into two steps, the first one being, starting, beginning, setting in motion that usually requires one person, and the second one being bearing, completing the activity, seeing it through to the end, which requires a multiplicity of participants. Political action, therefore is a complex and interdependent activity between followers, and a beginner, who, according to Arendt, is only “a primus inter pares.” The image of the strong man, therefore, in only an illusion given the true nature of action. Without the presence of multiple actors, action is impossible.

According to Arendt political power arises out of this public space, the organization of people speaking, debating and acting together in concert. Without this coming together and acting in concert, power cannot be generated. “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men in existence.”

Power has a dual quality. On the one hand, its existence is not dependent on a particular physical location, like the city-state. Politics is “is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be… action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.” On the other hand, it means that power is fragile. Its existence depends on the coming together of individuals, of action and speech. “Whenever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” And as soon as human beings disperse, or the activities of action and speech cease, power, too, ceases to exist.

11 Ibid., 176.
12 Ibid., 186.
13 Ibid., 188.
14 According to Arend, two Greek verbs that correspond to the verb “act” are achein and prattein. The Latin verbs are agere and gerere. Arendt, The Human Condition, 189.
15 Ibid., 200.
16 While Arendt is deeply inspired by the Greek notions of action and politics in her account, this assertion affirms that Arendt’s conception of public space and power transcends the classical notion and takes on a decidedly modern appearance.
17 Arendt, The Human Condition, 198.
18 Aerndt, The Human Condition, 199.
GEZI PARK PROTESTS
How can we account for the sudden, forceful and quite unexpected mass demonstrations (“Gezi resistance” as it came to be known) that culminated in the occupation of a public space by the protest movement? In the remainder of the essay, I will attempt to deploy the Arendtian concept of public space as “a space of appearance” in order to analyze the Occupy movements. I will illustrate this analysis with examples from the experience of #OccupyGezi protests of June 2013 in Turkey.

First, a caveat. Urban spaces have always been sites of conflict, struggle and resistance. From the urban riots of early 1900s to the civil rights movements in the midcentury, the urban conflicts have brought to the forefront the inequality of social relations, confronted the arbitrary delineation of the public space, challenged and altered the set of activities that are deemed by the dominant powers to be appropriate for those public spaces. The “street” therefore has always been an inherent and internal site of modern politics. In fact, over the last 10 years, the world has witnessed a series of urban conflicts, wide waves of spontaneous protests, riots, and insurrections including the banlieu riots of Paris in 2005 and 2007, the Athens protests in 2008, and the London riots of August 2011. Yet, the contention of this paper is that there is a particular quality to the urban movements that are centered on decided and indeterminate occupation of a public space such as the Tahrir Square, Zucotti Park or the Gezi Park. The argument is that these new public spaces hold the potential for the creation of new political subjectivities and the possibility of a new, participatory kind of democratic politics.

The causes of the protests
The problem with representative politics is that it leaves ordinary people out of participation in the decision-making process, fails to give them adequate voice to raise their concerns; politics becomes a behind-the-scenes negotiation between political elites. In the case of Turkey, the major problem, according to the protesters, rose from the translation of a single party’s (and its leader’s) will directly into national policy without further input from the rest of the population. The protesters claimed that getting an increasingly bigger share of the votes in national elections and finally achieving an approximately 50% majority in 2011, led AKP leader and Prime Minister Erdogan to enact policies that ran counter to the values, sentiments, beliefs and life-styles of the remaining 50%. In a preliminary online survey conducted on June 3-4, during the heyday of the protests shortly after the occupation of Gezi Park started, the participants were asked why they supported the Gezi Resistance. 92.4% of the survey participants indicated that the Prime Minister’s authoritarian attitude prompted them to support the Gezi Resistance. Protesters were also overwhelmingly concerned about the violence displayed by the police forces (91.3%) and the violation of individual’s democratic rights and freedoms (91.1%). Another survey conducted with face-to-face interviews with protesters between June 8-9 in Gezi Park and the adjacent Taksim Square and the surrounding areas had similar findings. An overwhelming 71.8% of the participants saw perceived the Prime Minister and

20 The incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) gained the following percentage of the votes in the national elections: 34.29% in 2002, 46.66% in 2007, and finally 49.83% in 2011.
AKP responsible for the protests. According to the same survey, the protesters thought the biggest problem in Turkey was lack of freedoms. (18.9%)

It is noteworthy to repeat that these protests erupted upon the proposed demolition of Gezi Park, one of Istanbul’s smaller but centrally placed neighborhood parks. Environmental activists had started gathering in the park and organizing peaceful protests and awareness-rising events since May 27, but the popular support for the protests began to materialize after the images of police brutality against the protesters while removing them forcefully from the park hit the social media. So while originally being motivated by environmental concerns, the Gezi protests transcended the initial goals and turned into a larger opposition movement that protested the big and expensive urban projects, the lack of societal input in restructuring of public urban spaces, the diminishing role of public debate in society, and finally the shrinking realm of democratic rights and freedoms. This situation is reflected in the findings of surveys.23

The protesters, therefore, rejected the constraints imposed on the politics by the liberal definition as an electoral race between competing parties at four-year intervals. Instead, they were pushing for a more inclusive understanding of both local and national political decision-making, in short a new and inclusive political space, which rejects the established order of politics, and registers each and every participant as an active member of the decision making process.

The occupation
Occupation is in itself an act of defiance. The “empty space, is not so much empty as it is ‘pre-occupied’” by the state. The act of occupation, therefore, immediately establishes a peculiar relationship between the protesters and the state. The protesters want to be acknowledged by their defiant presence while at the same time realizing that the forceful removal by the police forces of the state is a possibility and, especially in cases like Turkey, a constant threat.24 As Mitchell reminds us, “occupation is a form of expressive conduct that states a determination to remain and dwell in the public space indefinitely.”25 On the one hand, unlike mass demonstrations, occupations are not limited by the constraints of time and space. There is no beginning time and there is no foreseeable end. On the other hand, occupation cannot be conceived out of this particular physical location. Occupation lasts only as long as the physical space is occupied.

In this physically occupied space, the Gezi protesters tested the limits of the state, and the limits of the public space as defined and drawn by the state. As they contested the traditional definition of politics as electoral mandate, they were able to dream that a new kind of politicized public space is possible. The constant threat of police intervention, the excessive force that was used against the protesters around the park and in protests in other cities around Turkey in solidarity with the Gezi movement both crystallized the protests and demonstrated

23 56.2% participants of the first survey saw the cutting down of trees in Gezi Park as a reason to support the protests. In the second survey, only about 9.4% of the participants picked protecting the trees/preventing the demolition of the park as reason for the protests. The difference probably stems from the fact that in the first survey participants were given a set of reasons that are commonly articulated in the public about why individuals support the protests and they were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed/agreed/ or did not agree at all with the each reason. The participants, therefore, were able to articulate more than one reason for their support of the protests. The second survey on the other hand, asked the protesters to choose one reason and the total % of the choices added up to 100.

24 Mitchell, 2012b, 10.

25 Mitchell, 2012a, 5
the extent to which the governmental authorities were threatened by this new, extraordinary, novel form of political existence.

The protesters
One of the enduring images of the Gezi protests is the following:

“When I saw it, I couldn’t believe it,” a protester of Alevi background said in an interview. “I thought, how could this happen?”

What is so unbelievable about this picture? The picture has captured two protesters, who are fleeing hand-in-hand from the pressurized water of an armored police vehicle (best known as TOMA) out-of-view. The woman protester is holding a Turkish flag with the face of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, while the man is holding a Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) flag, a pro-Kurdish minority party with 20 seats in the parliament. Meanwhile another protester is captured signing “the grey wolf,” an ultranationalist hand gesture.

Turkey’s strained political history has made such alliances very unlikely in the past, and prevented supporters of these political positions from debating the challenging political issues of the country in a calm and informed manner, let alone acting together for a common purpose in the public. Occupy Gezi Park movement made precisely such unlikely alliances a political possibility. In Gezi Park, nationalists walked hand-in-hand with socialists. Secular voices with Turkish flags, stood side by side with self-identified anti-capitalist, revolutionary Muslims, LGBTs, socialist feminists, Kurds, Alevis, Sunnis, occupied Gezi with the same enthusiasm, common purpose and fervor. All these groups shared food, exchanged basic necessities to protect themselves against police attacks using makeshift measures like anti-acid water, goggles and gas masks. They danced together and sang together. The intimacy of the face-to-face encounter with the other made individuals more willing to have an engaged and informed conversation with protesters of the opposite view. The beauty of the public space proved its ability to bring together many points of view from different sectors of life and in doing so respecting the autonomy of every individual. In the public space, individual demonstrators revealed themselves to one another. Not only did they make the outside world, a national and

global world of spectators, aware of their numbers, they also discovered their own numbers, the magnitude of a group of very different people but with identical political, economic, and in the case of Turkey’s Gezi park, social, cultural and environmental demands. Gezi Park was the quintessential Arendtian public space.

As we have observed in other movements around the world, one of the most relevant features of the Occupy movements is the conspicuous and deliberate lack of leadership. In fact, Taussig observes that when the public assembly was held in Zucotti Park, one of the crew members from the sanitation group starts her words, which echoes through the people’s microphone, as follows:

“Hello  
Hello  
I am the Sanitation Group  
I am the Sanitation Group  
(Her voice is shrill, authoritative, nagging)  
I am not the Leader  
I am not the Leader  
(long pause)  

I am a leader  
I am a leader”\(^27\)

Renouncing the figure of the charismatic leader in favor of the face in the crowd has been characteristic of Occupy movements. This has also created a situation in which the Occupy movements were never able to formulate a set of reasonable demands. Some have hailed this precise situation as the movement’s advantage, which in fact points out to the novelty and the extraordinary nature of the Occupy in terms of disobeying traditional political conventions. Harcourt even criticizes “fellow travelers like Paul Krugman or Nicholas Kristof” for failing to understand the true nature of the movement and instead misguidedly trying to “gift a reasonable set of demands to the movement”.\(^28\)

Perhaps the most noteworthy accomplishment of the Gezi resistance in this regard has been to reject the figure of the leader, as in other Occupy movements, but not succumb to the executive inefficiency that accompanies the loss of a publicly visible and identifiable figurehead. The vastly different constituents of the Gezi protests, such as NGOs, mostly left political parties, professional associations, trade unions, community groups, soccer club fan clubs, have come together under the umbrella organization of Taksim Solidarity Platform.\(^29\)

The movement, therefore, was quick to formulate a set of simple, clear and democratic demands and to continuously reiterate them throughout the occupation and its aftermath. This leaderless system of government allowed the movement to keep the peace, to find unity in community without sacrificing a set of achievable, reasonable demands.

\(^{29}\) For a detailed list of the 128 constituents of Taksim Solidarity, see its website: http://taksimdayanisma.org/bilesenler?lang=en. While the protestors’ demand for more freedom, democracy, openness and participation in the political process has surpassed the limited goals of Solidarity for healthy urbanization and a livable city, it has nevertheless become the central core of information dissipation, coordination and planning for the Gezi protests.
CONCLUSION
Slovaj Zizek began his address to the protesters at NY’s Occupy Wall Street with a warning. “There is a danger,” he cautioned. “Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?”

In fact, Arendt herself was wary of the “lost treasure” of revolutions. While she argued that every new generation, every revolution was capable of giving birth to a new order of freedom, she also realized that each new generation also has to “swim against an awesome, repetitive tide.”

“It was nothing more or less than this hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government that would permit every member of modern egalitarian society to become a ‘participant’ in public affairs, that was buried in the disasters of twentieth-century revolutions.”

Indeed, what will happen next? What will be the remaining image of the Occupy movements in the public?

First of all, the iconic images of violence have been indelibly carved into public memory. The image of the girl in the blue bra, being brutally beaten by the Egyptian in Cairo’s Tahrir square while protesting against the military rule became on the one hand the visual reminder of the violent police response to protesters and on the other hand a rallying cry for hundreds of Egyptian women who marched into the streets to demand the end of the military rule.

Similarly, the image of the “woman in red” in Turkey’s Gezi protests was not only the first spark in initiating people to take action by pouring into the streets. It became an iconic imagery of the power of people’s resilience, determination and power as they act together in

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concert to demand freedom, justice, their right to a greener environment, transparent governmental practices and end to police brutality.

But most importantly the lasting image of the Occupy movement is the public space itself. From Tahrir Square to Zucotti Park, open, urban public space itself might have been the lasting legacy of the occupy movements in general and of Gezi resistance in Turkey in particular. Shortly following the forcible removal of the protesters form Gezi park on June 15th, Taksim Solidarity, made an announcement and asked the public to carry the Gezi spirit to their neighborhood parks. With this call to action, tens of neighborhood forums sprang up around Istanbul and other parts of Turkey.

Each of these sites in return became an arena pushing the boundaries of the public political imagination. They challenged the traditional notions of electoral politics and reimagined the possibility of participatory democracy. They managed to bring a new kind of politics to every city district, to every neighborhood park. They created the space for conceiving new ideas, tactics and forms of resistance. They opened up the possibility of thinking about politics without the imposition of traditional political parties and ideologies.

The political turmoil in Egypt illustrates the difficulty of institutionalizing political opposition and transforming the revolutionary moment into democratic, egalitarian, participatory political structures. Indeed, these revolutionary moments are not inevitable historical processes that once set into motion cannot be reversed. Instead, the current political circumstances of Egypt remind us of the fragility of democracy and the necessity for continuing struggles to imagine and realize inclusive political orders.

Whether the park forums in Turkey will create durable transformations in the Turkish political landscape remains to be seen. The Occupy movement in Turkey, however, has shown that the political order is susceptible to change, and change for the better in terms of democratic freedoms, and an inclusive public space. Thus movement has initiated the spark for a new form of political imagination and new practices of citizenship.