THINKING BEYOND THE DUALITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

LESSONS FROM GEZI PARK

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that critical urban theorists should reframe their questions on how theory can be useful for practice. Drawing on fieldwork done with participants of the Gezi Park Protest in Istanbul, this paper shows that the relationship between theory and practice is a continuous process that is negotiated by particularities of context. The narratives of feminist, LGBTQI+, and ethnic minority activists in the Gezi Park Protest show that in the case of Istanbul, core concepts of critical urban theory such as right to the city and the urban politics of the inhabitants are involved in stages of activist subject formation, yet lived experiences and their contextual meanings maintain their importance. Moreover, throughout the process of the occupation of Gezi Park, novel practices and moments of encounter produced results that are both contributory to critical urban theoretical frameworks and activist practices in the city. This paper thus contends that epistemological polarizations of theory and practice in the field of critical urban theory should be rethought, especially in light of practical examples.

KEYWORDS: critical urban theory, right to the city, urban politics of the inhabitant, Gezi Park Protests

1. INTRODUCTION

> "As governments resort to violence and as their unfair acts rise, their legitimacy becomes more and more questionable. This is what keeps Gezi alive and kicking. For this reason, Gezi's spirit of solidarity and coexistence against the dominant attitude is still sound. What sustains the solidarity over Gezi is that the effects of repression are felt with ever-increasing intensity. Gezi is not an attempt to occupy the public sphere; it is an initiative to restore it."
>
> – Korhan Gümüs, architect and activist

The increasing number of urban social movements in recent years (Occupy Wall Street in the US, the 3M Movement in Spain, Tahrir Square in Egypt, and Syntagma Square in Greece to name a few), has brought critical urban theory to the fore in scholarly debates. Many important questions have emerged: why is it even necessary to see urban theory through a different lens (Sidney 2010, Stone 2010)? How can it be a concrete roadmap to tackle issues of social justice in the city (Storper and Scott 2016)? What kind of insights does critical urban theory provide in terms of rethinking citizenship (Yiftachel 2009) or urban planning from below (Holston 2007, Rankin 2012)? How can theory illuminate practice, and how would critical urban theory translate into citizenship (Harvey and Wachsmuth 2012)?

These are all significant questions, but in this paper, I will reframe the latter two in light of the reconsideration of the relationship between theory and practice in the urban landscape. I will draw upon concepts which constitute critical urban theory, such as the right to the city, rebel cities, and urban politics of the inhabitant, and invite us to rethink what they look like from a grounded point of view, To this end, I will sketch out how participants in the Gezi Park Movement in Istanbul perceived these concepts and incorporated them into their practice. In 2014 and 2015, I conducted preliminary fieldwork with Istanbul-based activists of various affiliations and backgrounds (such as feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations, and Kurdish affinity). These interviews provide valuable insight into how critical urban theoretical concepts "hit the ground" (Tsing 2005) in Turkey, and how the frictions emanating from this encounter shaped how the participants viewed the relationship between theory and practice with regards to grassroots urban politics.

I argue that asking questions such as "how can theoretical discussions inform practice," or "how can critical urban theory create better strategies for urban social movements" implies the prioritization of theory over practice, or even implicitly argues for a clear-cut dichotomy between the two; but on the ground, there is a much more messy picture. In the context of Gezi Park, while upper- or middle-class participants were acquainted with concepts like the right to the city prior to their involvement in the movements due to access to education, the moment of encounter in the park shaped how they viewed these concepts and rendered it different than what they read in books. Further, those who were not acquainted with such theoretical frameworks, mostly due to their class background intertwined with ethnicity (such as those from working-class Kurdish families) developed an understanding through the experience of being there. This socialization and reciprocal learning experience actually molded and transformed the theoretical frameworks and practices undertaken in Turkey.

In this sense, scholars of critical urban theory should not think of theory and practice as totally opposite poles. Nor is the relationship linear, with one always affecting the other.

Scholars should instead regard the relationship between critical urban theory and practice as necessarily continuous, interrelated, and fluid. The illustrative case of Gezi Park I discuss shows an muddled image of what precedes what, and instead of conceiving of theory and practice as completely separate domains, we should see them as porous and mutually constitutive entities whose relationship gains meaning on the ground.

2. CRITICAL URBAN THEORY: CORE CONCEPTS AND DEBATES

In order to make a case about the relationship between critical urban theory and practice based on how core concepts came to life in Gezi Park, it is helpful to first define the terms in play. What exactly is critical urban theory? How did it come about, what does it seek to accomplish according to those who partake in its construction, what are the kinds of questions critical urban theorists have been asking, and how do they relate to the questions I pursue in this paper?

Critical urban theory, which is classified as an "intellectual field" in between disciplines by Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer (2012:3), became solidified and consolidated by the end of the sixties and into the seventies. The genesis of the field was contemporaneous with social movements going on in cities across the world. For instance, the necessity of reframing debates on "the urban" became immediately evident, as Parisian youth grew discontented with the makeup of their urban surroundings. A generation that grew up in the suburbs mobilized in part against their "boredom" with how the city was, which is reflective of how spaces shape the subjectivities, while simultaneously being produced by the subjects they help construct (Harvey 2012).

Scholars such as Lefebvre, Harvey, and Castells contributed to a body of work that departed from what Brenner (2012:11) calls "mainstream" urban theory such as "the approaches inherited from Chicago School of urban sociology, or those deployed with technocratic or neoliberal forms of policy science." The first intervention was concerned with the conceptualization of space. Rather than seeing space as a given physical surrounding, or a canvas that only those with appropriate knowledge should fill, Lefebvre (1991, 1996) expanded its definition as something that is produced by people in manifold ways. In this vein, he coined perceived space, conceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre 1991). In Purcell's (2002: 102) words, these terms refer to the following:

Lefebvre's idea of space includes what he calls perceived space, conceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). Perceived space refers to the relatively objective, concrete space people encounter in their daily environment. Conceived space refers to mental constructions of space, creative ideas about and representations of space. Lived space is the complex combination of perceived and conceived space. It represents a person's actual experience of space in everyday life. Lived space is not just a passive stage on which social life unfolds, but represents a constituent element of social life (Lefebvre, 1991, Soja 1996).

By outlining the different trajectories culminating in the production of space, he made visible the many constituent entities that create a city and make it what it is, rather than limiting this capacity to people in positions of power. In other words, his valuable contribution consisted of introducing space as a perceived, conceived, and lived entity, made visible how it is something *produced* in a *collective* manner, through the weaving of all the differentiated conceptions, lived experiences, and perceptions into the urban fabric.

This provided a completely new lens, a powerful alternative to what Brenner calls the mainstream approaches.

The explicit definition of cities as capitalist enterprises was another important intervention. Lefebvre (1996), Castells (1977) and Harvey (1976) converged in their depictions of the urban as the primary site of production, circulation, and consumption of commodities. This consideration, they argued, was vital to understanding cities, as the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities molded how cities are governed, as well as the conflicts that arise in these settings. In this sense, cities are not merely stages on which commodification is practiced. Instead, commodification is intrinsic to what a city is: "from buildings and the built environment to land-use systems, networks of production and exchange, and metropolitan-wide infrastructural arrangements" (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2012:3).

Critical urban theory's occupations with the urban are not only descriptive, though. It does not only try to portray the current state of the urban, but rather, "it insists that another, more democratic, socially just, and sustainable form of urbanization is possible, even if such possibilities are currently being suppressed through dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies" (Brenner 2012:11). In this sense, it is a critique of circulation power relationships, as well as ideologically vested inequalities.

Critical urban theorists conceive of the production of the city as a continuous, open-ended process. Therefore, even though structural limitations are overwhelming, there is always room for change led by struggle. In this sense, one important concept put forward by Lefebvre (1996) is right to the city, in the face of an enfranchised city. He calls for a demand from people who *inhabit* the city for a radical restructuring that is beyond reform or changes in governance. What is significant in this framework is that first, the ability to claim this right is not based on citizenship; and second, it requires an entire change in decision-making when it comes to the way in which cities are shaped. In his words, the right to the city:

"should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (citadin) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the 'marginal' and even for the 'privileged')" Lefebvre (1996:34).

Taking up this concept, Harvey (2008) argues that the pursuit of the right to the city in the radical manner that Lefebvre proposes will be the harbinger of a broader sense of social change, as cities are the main pillars of capitalist modes of governance – at a more accelerated pace, in an unprecedented way. He argues that the urban landscape leads the broader capitalist economy. Therefore, movements that seek to affect societal transformation should center their efforts in cities. In this further work, he underlines what can be achieved: social practices of commoning in the face of commodification, making visible the public good as an alternative to neoliberalization, and construction of alternative globalizations through socialization into the right to the city (Harvey 2013). Harvey's terminology includes "spaces of hope" (Harvey 2000), sites of varying scales of the struggle for this right, and "rebel cities" (Harvey 2013), sites at the scale of the city.

The idea of the right to the city as an emancipatory framework, however, has not gone uncontested. Even Harvey (2013) himself, for instance, questions what this concept entails

in terms of leadership, as he expresses his skepticism of radical decentralization or anarchism as a leading school of thought in right to the city movements. Purcell (2002) has also been preoccupied with the question of how to render the right to the city more meaningful than a catchphrase. To this end, he argues that we should return to Lefebvre's notions of it, excavate what he exactly means free from the myriad obfuscations of the secondary literature, and clarify the core ideas with conceptual modifications. In this vein, he puts forward the concept "the urban politics of the inhabitant," which emphasizes on denizenship with regards to urban decision-making. He argues that this concept concretizes how the right to the city can be arranged: it should involve a multi-scalar and multi-territorial structuring of decision-making (Purcell 2002). Put another way, it is not only inclusion in the system or centralized units of governance, for instance, but a multiplication of decision-making units that can be seen in many scales and that can be done in various sites of the city.

But even beyond concerns with practicality or concretization of the concept, different critiques of the right to the city idea have surfaced in the academic arena. Mitchell (1997, 2003), as an example, argues against what he coins "the rights talk." Framing a radical demand for change as a "right" takes away the core of what it argues for, marking it indelibly with a language built around a conception of citizenship as inherently based on nationhood. In this sense, the way critical urban theorists talk about radical transformation becomes internally contradictory.

Feminist and queer geographers such as Knopp (2007) and Valentine (2007) also offered incisive critiques. Both scholars argue that critical urban theory or large frameworks such as right to the city homogenize the struggles over how space is produced, which eclipses experiences of spaces differentiated by gender and sexuality and limits the political possibilities they could otherwise generate. In a similar vein, Purcell (2002) is critical of an emphasis on the capitalist city as the problematique of critical urban theory and its search for denouements. He argues that critical urban theorists should also address the racist, patriarchal, heteronormative city, which poses as many problems as the capitalist one – if not more. In line with Valentine (2007), theorists should also ask how such notions of the city intersect, or assemble into different relationalities and imbrications of power and ideology through the ways in which spaces are decided upon, produced, and governed.

3. CONSIDERING THEORY, FORMING SUBJECTS, THINKING THROUGH CLASS AND ETHNICITY

"Reading theory in college shaped my life. I was a Sociology major, and I had an interest in all kinds of theory: feminist theory, urban theory… it shaped how I think about the world, and my identity as an activist," said Çiçek, one of the leading organizers of Istanbul Feminist Collective. She, like five other respondents of mine from this feminist organization, is well read in Western theory, as well as academic works produced in other contexts. Socialist Feminist Collective and Amargi Women's Collective were among other bigger feminist organizations (meaning, with over 1000 members) that protested in the park. Their narratives indicate similar understandings of theory. They each regarded theory as something many women were introduced to during their years as college undergraduates that gave voice to and solidified the discontent they had with their surroundings. "I was

mad, I couldn't put it into words – reading all that, all that de Beauvoir, Butler…it helped!" said Simge, from the Amargi Women's Collective.

For students like Çiçek and Simge, discontent with dominant modes of patriarchy and comprehension of their institutional social world of their surroundings were both informed by the readings they did in college. Many of them pursued the readings' ideas further as graduate students, testifying to the ideas' power as analytical tools. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of the women involved with organized groups at Gezi Park held college degrees, most of them in social sciences. The women who studied other branches, such as natural sciences, also got involved through reading: Ayse, for instance, started with magazine articles and then found out about the Socialist Feminist Collective. The more she got involved, the more she socialized into the reading groups carried out in the collective and became familiar with the theoretical works they discussed, like Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*. "Those experiences made me who I am as an activist, and that is why I went to Taksim Square that day," Ayse says.

According to most of these women's accounts of their activism and their presence at Gezi Park, reading social theory played a big role – which mostly resulted from either directly from their college education, or, their engagement with circles with access to such levels of education or interests. Most of them were aware of David Harvey's writings, if not of Lefebvre's. By making this point, I am not suggesting a direct link between reading social theory as an undergraduate and participating in Gezi Park, nor am I making a case for the immediate results of critical urban theory in the form of making people take the streets. Rather, I propose that reading theory illuminates a process of activist subjectivity-making that seems to have guided the feminist involvements of these women in multiple ways, participation in Gezi Park being one among many engagements. 14 women I interviewed from these three big collectives did not situate the initial decision of going to the park in the framework of theory when protests erupted in the summer of 2013: they conceived of their participation as a result of their identification as activists who are aware of "the right to the city," who are aware of the importance of our built environments, who are aware of the broader (neoliberal) picture that is not limited to "some trees," unlike the words of Erdogan, the country's Prime Minister of the time. In this sense, although theoretical frameworks did not directly cause them to participate, they certainly played a pivotal and even inspirational role.

Importantly, most of the women partaking in the three bigger feminist organizations do not belong to marginalized groups defined by ethnicity and class. Most of them identify as middle class, or upper-middle class women – and almost all of them, according to my respondents, had access to college education. Only one of my respondents, Berivan in the Amargi Feminist Collective, was of Kurdish origin, arguably one of the biggest groups that have been historically oppressed by the Turkish state. As far as she was concerned, the numbers of Kurdish women in these bigger, Istanbul-based feminist organizations were few. This does not indicate animosity against marginalized groups within these organizations, at least, in my respondents' words. Women, especially in the leading positions, indicated that they have been meaning to reach out to poorer potential members, but it just didn't work up until that point. Feminist circles' identification with theory, including critical urban theory, illustrates a key point: although theory strongly influences subject formation vis-à-vis right to the city movements, the relationship is not causal. Nor is the relationship independent from issues of class and ethnicity, which play an important

role in terms of access to theory in the context of Istanbul. Moreover, theoretical engagements – especially at the moment of entering Gezi Park – seem to be strongly related to participants' positionalities in terms of the intersection of class and ethnicity.

4. LIVED EXPERIENCES, THEORY, AND DIFFERENT SUBJECTIVITIES

Alongside the big three feminist collectives of Istanbul, I interviewed nine participants from two LGBTQI+ organizations: Kaos GL, with the largest number of members in Turkey, and LuBunya, an organization that is mostly, but not only, geared towards the students of Bogazici University. Further, I reached out to six respondents in relation with the youth branches of Halklarin Demokratik Partisi (HDP), the left-leaning opposition party in Turkey, with minority rights (especially those of Kurds) on the forefront of their agenda. Five of these respondents identified themselves as Kurdish, and the other as Armenian.

For this group of respondents, lived experiences were often more significant to the process of subject formation as theory. Their lived experiences shaped what perceived and lived space meant to them in a quotidian sense. Three of the members I met from Kaos GL were from humble backgrounds: they identified themselves as middle-class, and their family backgrounds as "not the wealthiest in Turkey," in Bikem's words. The other members were working either in white-collar jobs or academic positions, and although they referred to queer theory from time to time, they did not mention their study as a turning point in their lives, Instead, reading theory accompanied or translated their experiences. Kerem explains: "I am flamboyant: people see me, they see who I am, they treat me as such. I've been experiencing queerness on the street for a long time. I like reading books and seeing how people talk about it, but it doesn't necessarily make me who I am as a LGBT activist. I would still be who I am." Görkem, a member of LuBunya, has a similar account of things. Reading groups are important to his organization, but they are not necessarily what gets people on the street. In a similar vein, my respondents that work with HDP all expressed that they experienced marginalization on a day-to-day basis, and although they learn from reading groups, it did not necessarily make them into activists.

Instead, they experienced critical urban theory's conceptualization of the city in many ways through living in the specific context of Istanbul. The Kurdish respondents, for instance, have extensive accounts of how the neighborhoods in which they grew up changed: most of their families ended up in Istanbul due to the armed strife in their home cities and settled in Istanbul's shanty towns, yet became more and more displaced due to the shifts in urban decision-making (see Bartu Candan and Özbay 2014). They experienced a "lack of voice," in Baran's words, when it came to decision-making in the city. Their disenfranchisement was very much linked to the increasingly strong alignment of neoliberal politics with the rising Islamist discourse. But in addition to this globalized trajectory in policy agendas, the deep-seated history of Turkish nation-making complicated the picture (see Öktem 2011). LGBTQI+ activists were also unhappy with their exclusion from deciding how the urban was to be shaped, which, in their view, diverged from Western trajectories due to dichotomous understandings of manhood and masculinity and womanhood and femininity in the context of Istanbul. The tensions between secularism and rising Islamism, especially in terms of governance, complicated which places they can

occupy in the city. Indeed, their rights of access seem to be always shifting, and more and more negotiated by their capacity to enter privatized spaces of entertainment.

All of these experiences led these groups to seek entitlements to urban space, or a right to the city. In narrating their participation, they not only drew on the city as a capitalist space, but they used a new vocabulary to refer to impediments in decision-making in much the same way as the critiques of Knopp (2007), Valentine (2007) and Purcell (2002). Importantly, they complicated the suppression they experienced by "dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies" (Brenner 2012:11) through a picture of how it solidifies differently due to contextuality and positionality. The specific context of Istanbul, and Turkish history in a broader sense, changed the way in which the urban is governed, shaped, and controlled for these activists. Their positionalities as marginalized subjects molded their lived spaces as well as the meaning of "right to the city" or even "the city," all in their specific spatial and temporal context. For these activists, understanding these issues was absolutely necessary to be able to satisfactorily state the problem in Gezi Park. Their theoretical encounters culminated with their participation in social movements pursuing an entirely new urban politics.

5. ENCOUNTERS: ADVANCING THEORY, ADVANCING PRACTICE

Now, let's return to some of the debates raised in critical urban theory. Specifically, how can the "right to the city" be exercised without solid leadership? How can urban decision-making be radically altered in a practical sense? Critical urban theorists have elaborated upon these questions in useful ways, but I propose an emphasis on the consideration of practices on the ground. I contend that the everyday life during the Gezi Park occupation shows important examples of how theoretical conceptions urban politics of the inhabitant can be put into practice, and how real world encounters in the pursuit of right to the city can advance both theory and practice.

When talking about their experiences of occupying Gezi Park, and making it their built environment, activists drew on certain particularly novel practices. All of my respondents provided extended accounts of assemblies carried out in the park itself. These meetings often spilled over into surrounding areas. Neighborhood assemblies in Gezi Park became the places in which urban inhabitants came together to make decisions, show their bodily presence (Gambetti 2014), and voice their differentiated lived experiences as denizens of Istanbul. Such gatherings were carried out without clear leadership, but were still able to decide how to proceed, in spite of Harvey's (2013) predictions. Furthermore, they provided settings in which manifold considerations in the quotidian could be voiced on site: when sexist language was used or women were silenced, feminists interfered; when people made homophobic gestures, others warned them; when speakers asserted a unitary and singular understanding of Turkishness, their listeners made sure to remind them of the lived experiences and marginalizations of ethnic minorities.

I argue that the theoretical encounters these meetings represent are illuminating for critical urban theory, both in terms of the practical concerns it raised and the critiques various scholars have posed. The meetings show how an urban politics of the inhabitant can be carried out in a multiscalar, multi-territorial manner. Neighborhood assemblies concerned with the right to specifically green public spaces gave rise to a grassroots formation of political practices oriented toward exercising that right practically. Once again, we see how

theoretical outlines become assembled with particular contexts and their historicities, and in turn, give rise to practical formations that is important for the advancement of theory. Further, such encounters on the ground illuminate how a critical view of the capitalist city can simultaneously be critical of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and singular nationalism. In other words, such interventions in the movement itself in the course of deliberation processes bring to the fore clues about how the urban can be analyzed intersectionally. Crucially, this analysis is based on what is actually happening on the ground, rather than an overarching theory. In this case, lived experiences and how they produce spaces steer the way in which a right to the city is pursued in Gezi Park, illuminating important lessons for theory-making for the city, as well as the relationship between theory and practice.

It should be noted that, throughout the occupation, many meetings were held where groups discussed the "right to the city" as a theory, learned about what other movements drew from it, and used the idea in educational discussions about other topics like gender, sexuality, and Kurdish history. Organizers disseminated flyers and posted on social media employing the language of critical urban theory. Banners and signs hung on the tents of Gezi Park frequently featured the phrase *sehir hakki,* "right to the city" in Turkish. So in this analysis, I am not arguing that critical urban theory and its influences were completely absent in Gezi Park, nor am I arguing for a privileging of practice over theory. Instead, I am inviting scholars to ask questions beyond "how can critical urban theory help social movements," considering of alternative directionalities and relationships in terms of the relationship between theory and practice.

6. CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

By drawing on various examples on the contributions of Gezi Park protestors and everyday practices during the occupation, I argue that we should challenge the strands of debates privileging theory over practice on two fronts. First, I maintain that it is not a unidirectional and linear relationship. Theory does not directly lead into formations of practice, and the interaction between theory and practice does not follow a dichotomous logic. Both theory and practice inform each other and blur the boundaries between, sometimes with emphasis on the former, and sometimes on the latter.

I also argue that for the encounter between theory and practice is not something that happens in a single moment: it is a continuum whose nature is very much intertwined with contexts and positionalities. They are in an ongoing relationship, where important lessons for both theory and practice can be drawn with respect to one another, as exemplified in the discussion above.

In this sense, I argue that we rethink our larger epistemological frameworks, specifically regarding the relationship between theory and practice. We can learn from Gezi Park that thinking about this relationship in a new light not only helps us develop academic work on the critique of the urban, but offer ways in which urban activism can change our reality for the better.

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