

*** Please note that this paper is a work in progress. Please do not distribute without prior consent of the author.**

Brotherhood of the Abject:

State Violence and the Ethics of Expectation in Turkey

Kabir Tambar

Department of Anthropology

Stanford University

ktambar@stanford.edu

In June 2013, many of Turkey's cities and provinces exploded in protest. Initially sparked by a relatively small demonstration in late May to protect Gezi Park in Istanbul from demolition, the protests grew exponentially in magnitude after police forces aggressively intervened with water cannons, plastic bullets, and tear gas. Confrontations between protestors and the police continued throughout June and into July. The firing of tear gas canisters itself killed at least two people, one individual was killed with live ammunition, and another died after being severely beaten by a police officer dressed in civilian clothes (Amnesty International 2013). On August 1, 2013, the Turkish Medical Association announced that five people had died, eleven had lost an eye, 106 had suffered serious head injuries, and 63 were in critical condition (Türk Tabipleri Birliği 2013). While over five thousand individuals have been prosecuted for organizing or participating

in the protests, only five police officers were standing trial, with another two awaiting trial, as of April 2014 (Amnesty International 2014).

In late June of that year, as much of the country was convulsed with these events, Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, addressed members of his party. He began not with the Gezi events but with bombings that took place in Roboski village in the province of Şırnak in December 2011. Two Turkish fighter jets fired at and killed what, according to the government, were perceived to be PKK militants crossing the Turkish-Iraqi border.¹ In the event, it turned out that the 34 individuals who were killed were, in fact, civilians, not guerrillas. They were smuggling goods, like cigarettes, tea, and oil, and it appears that security forces were in fact well aware of these circuits of trade. Despite major protests that erupted after this incident across many Kurdish-majority cities in the southeast of Turkey, the official investigation had not led to the prosecution of the guilty parties.

About ten minutes into his discussion, Demirtaş indicated that this sort of state violence is not only applied to Kurds. Asking his audience to consider the ongoing protests in Istanbul and elsewhere, he continued, “When looking from Gezi park..., Roboski is more easily understood” (Demirtaş 2013). For Demirtaş, many of those looking from the debris of Gezi’s barricades were members of the Turkish majority who may not have previously viewed state violence in Kurdish provinces with much sympathy or comprehension.² To look from Gezi, in this assessment, was

¹ The PKK is the Kurdish organization whose armed wings have been fighting Turkish military forces for over three decades.

² The question of who, exactly, participated in the protests has been hotly debated. While some argue that it was a largely middle class affair (Tuğal 2013), others describe a more heterogeneous class composition, while noting the predominance of secularist political identifications (Yörük and Yüksel 2014). Given the diversity of participants, it is important to

to be granted the opportunity for historical insight. Moreover, Demirtaş was not only alluding to recent historical events or to violence against Kurds specifically: he proceeded to mention the Armenian genocide of the early twentieth century and episodes of violence against Alevis in the 1930s, 1970s, and 1990s. The experience of police aggression in Gezi offered its participants an unmasked illumination of the violent underbelly of republican statecraft.

Demirtaş did not shy from supporting the protestors and critiquing the current government's intransigent recourse to police violence in the face of dissent. However, in situating this violence within a longer history, his speech worked against efforts to celebrate the protests as spontaneous and novel, and he refused to identify the violence on display as a scandalous departure from the historical ideals of the republic. The scandal of state aggression against selected members of its citizenry betrayed an all-too-familiar political form that has repeated itself across republican history. Rather than simply denounce state violence in Gezi park, Demirtaş pointed to its generative possibilities. He concluded his history of violence with a gesture toward a possible political future: "Confronting all of these facts [of historical violence], confronting these truths, is an opportunity. It's an opportunity to better understand one another" (ibid.).

I will return to Demirtaş's speech over the course of this essay, and along the way I will discuss a few other discursive events that also sought to recast the historical significance and generative potential of the violence that dominated the protests. What interests me is less the constructed nature of historical narrative — a point long stressed by many scholars of nationalism — but more the way that appeals to history act as interventions into imagined

note that not all protestors had previously been uncritical of the Turkish state's use of force in Kurdish-majority regions; some protestors hailed from political communities that have long been critical of the state (including, among others, some leftists, Alevis, feminists, and anti-capitalist Muslims).

futures. In order to understand this relationship between historical narrative and ethico-political potentials waiting to be seized, I find it helpful to draw on Reinhart Koselleck's distinction between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. These categories are meant to conceptualize the integral sinews that bind memory to anticipation. Experience is "present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered." Expectation, by contrast, is "future made present..., [directed] to the not-yet... to that which is to be revealed" (Koselleck 2004: 259). Both of these terms, experience and expectation, are open to rival figurations. As anthropologists attuned to the temporal tropes of modernization have insisted, expectations are themselves both objects of political control and vulnerable to historical revision, open to competing social claims (Ferguson 1999; Deeb 2009; Tambar 2014; Piot 2010; Appadurai 2013).³

The moments depicted here sought to re-articulate past to future in ways that both exemplified the broader spirit of state critique that animated the Gezi protests and tried to establish a space of distance from them. This estranged engagement, or "close distance" (Mazzarella 2004), might be understood as the tense, dialectical act of leveraging, from within the very terms that structure political life, a reflexive interrogation of its organizing categories. The commentaries I discuss in this essay revisit the history of state violence against populations labeled as "minorities" or threatened with that designation; at the same time, they position their own discourse as addressed to the putative "majority," or those who would identify as such. What results is not primarily a set of claims to rights, resources, or recognition that presuppose the state as the site of political adjudication. Rather, the encounter yields what we might

³ For some scholars, the rubric of anticipation better captures the range of affective orientations of imagined futures (for instance, of contingency, hope, anxiety, or fear) (Adams, et. al. 2009; Bryant 2012; Masco 2014).

provisionally describe as an ethical demand upon the would-be majority to recognize the histories of violence that have not only privileged that community but which have constituted the very ground on which populations can be slotted into one category or the other. This essay seeks to unpack that ethical demand.

Throughout the essay, I speak of a “would-be” or “putative” majority not only because the term, *Türk*, shelters a linguistic ambiguity between ethnic identity and legal citizenship, but because this ambiguity is itself symptomatic of a historical conflation of the demographic concept of majority, which is an ostensibly measurable quantity of population, with the normative concept of nation, which purports to unify political community in the state. The efforts by Demirtaş and others who I discuss in this essay to address the majority are precisely aimed at prying open this gap, disinterring the demographic from its normative cast, in order to reorient its horizon of expectation.

I begin by exploring how the category of minority has helped scaffold the normative subject of political modernity, the nation. The figure of the minority has been shaped by what I call a “negative historicity:” negative, in the sense of being evacuated from the time and place of historical progression that has characterized the national subject. The symbolic space of national sovereignty, as it came to be defined with the birth of an international order of nation-states following World War 1, renders the minority spatially displaced — seen as foreign to what may have constituted its historical homelands — and temporally suspended from the narrative tethering of national experience to expectation.

After fleshing out the negative historicity of the minority, I return to scenes of commentary adjacent to the Gezi protests, asking how their temporal interventions redirect the minority question toward an ethical inquiry into the aspiration to majority. Rather than rejecting the

temporal suspension of the minority from the historical narratives of the Turkish nation, Demirtaş and others deploying this discursive maneuver summon Gezi protestors to relinquish their own sense of progressive historicity and, in effect, to embrace the negative historicity so often ascribed to the objects of state violence. In this, they seek not so much to redeem the nation from the violence it has unleashed, as to ask whether that very violence might serve as the ground on which to produce an alternate figure of a political community-to-come.

The Minority Question

Post-colonial scholars of nationalism have argued that the ostensibly linear time of the nation is in fact always fractured (Bhabha 1994; Chatterjee 2004). The enactment of cultural and religious imaginaries within contexts of urban, capitalist modernity (factories, political rallies, etc.) have often led modernist elites to condemn such practices as expressions of the historical past, but in their persistent presence such practices expose the heterogeneous temporalities that constitute national politics (Chakrabarty 2000). Similar arguments have been mobilized to understand the hetero-temporalities that have at once formed and fissured the modernist project in Turkey (Ahiska 2010; Dole 2012). Here, I do not wish to address the fractured temporalities of national modernity directly; instead, I begin by exploring the birth of a category whose negative historicity has been both crucial for and yet obscured by the narrative of the nation.

The founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was defined by the minority question. By this, I do not simply mean that, as with any nation-state, early Republican leaders strove to standardize language, history, cultural heritage and so on, in such a way as to marginalize religious and ethnic minorities. That broadly modular process was given sharper definition by the peace settlements that concluded World War 1 (between 1919 and 1923) and which also led to

the emergence of the Turkish Republic. Historian Eric Weitz (2008) notes that these settlements were premised on a new conception of politics, focused on discrete populations and the ideal of national homogeneity.⁴ He provocatively argues that this conviction enabled two seemingly contrary historical results: on the one hand, a new concern for the legal protection of minorities and, on the other hand, internationally sanctioned, forced deportations of populations from their historical homelands to new nation-states where they were now said to more authentically belong. According to Weitz, it was not the case that new protections for minorities were simply a humanitarian response meant to safeguard those communities from oppressive majorities. A certain violence was part and parcel of those protections and of that new concern for the minority.

The formation of the Turkish state exemplifies the conundrum of minority protection and displacement that was at the heart of the post war global order. From the republic's foundation in 1923, Jews, Armenian Christians, and Greek Christians were recognized as minorities and offered legal protections concerning their autonomy of religious organization. And yet, in the years leading up to the formation of the republican state, Armenian communities were deported or exiled out of Anatolia and killed, and the Lausanne Treaty that promised minority recognition was also the context in which the so-called population exchanges that compelled much of the Greek Orthodox community to leave Turkey were negotiated.

In this context, a community recognized as a minority gained certain rights and protections from the state. However, this recognition also carried the weight of an extraordinary historical judgment, at once moral and political, namely that the community in question was thenceforth to

⁴ Weitz is careful to note that the population politics, which came into sharp focus after War War 1, had precedents going back to the nineteenth century.

be viewed as in some sense external to the nation and its history, external to the body politic, and so also of suspect loyalty, even in cases where the “minority” population had deep historical roots in the territory now dominated by the new nation-state. Recognized as a population within the citizenry but distinct from the presumed majority, the minority constituted a figure at once included and excluded from the biopolitics of the nation-state. If sovereignty in the republican state belonged to the people, those who were now classed as minorities would always be ambiguously connected to this project. They were legally recognized as citizens and yet treated as suspect others. As Aron Rodrigue (2013: 44) argues, those classed as minorities “could remain Turkish citizens, but they would never be true Turks.” The ethos of suspicion was amplified by the fact that leaders of the new Turkish republic came to view the very designation of “minority” as a symbol of western imperial ambitions: in demanding that the minority clauses be accepted by the new republic, western powers encroached upon the nation-state’s sovereign autonomy in the very act of recognizing it (Ekmekçioğlu 2014; Mahmood 2012).

Mark Mazower (1997) argues that after World War 2 western powers shifted their emphasis from collective rights to individual human rights, but this change in ideological accent did not lessen the stigma attached to “minorities.” The term minority (*azınlık*) in Turkey today functions more often as an accusation hurled at socially vulnerable populations than as a strictly legal-bureaucratic category for allocating resources or ensuring communal rights. For instance, in the past decade Turkey’s Alevi community has been encouraged by the European Union to pursue rights as a religious minority. Indeed, many Alevi civil society groups have waged struggles for collective rights that are in fact offered to recognized minorities, like exemption from state-mandated religion courses in elementary and secondary schools. Yet overwhelmingly Alevi groups and intellectuals have rejected the “minority” label, justifying their repudiation of the

term with the claim that they are “foundational elements” (*asli unsur*) of the Turkish state. The concept of minority represents a mode of social recognition that Alevis have sought to evade, maneuver around, protect themselves against, or overtly repudiate, because it effectively excises the community from the historical past and future of the nation and its purportedly unified people (Tambar 2014).

For their part, Kurds have long been viewed by Turkish state elites as “prospective Turks” — that is, because of their predominantly Muslim denominational affiliation, they have often been seen as assimilable to the social, linguistic, and political norms of belonging in the Turkish nation. In moments when Kurdish organizations have been perceived as raising a fundamental threat to the Turkish state, especially acute in the past few decades with the onset of armed confrontation between the state and the PKK, Kurdish political leaders or public figures have been accused not simply of committing legal crimes but of being crypto-Jewish or crypto-Armenian — ethnoreligious affiliations that because of their minority-associations are regarded almost self-evidently as signs of disloyalty, verging on treason (Yeğen 2007; Paker 2010). Applicable even to those who once were considered “prospective Turks,” the negative historicity of the minority entails a moral sensibility that sustains ideological exclusions and justifies collective violence.

It is worth noting that the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which heads the current government and has progressively expanded its electoral dominance over the past decade, describes its own history as a struggle against state repression. Leader of the party and Prime Minister at the time of the protests, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commonly asserts that his party represents the oppressed (*ezilen*), who have not only been neglected but actively marginalized by Kemalist elites. AKP does not, however, define its constituency as a minority (*azınlık*). To the

contrary, it sees itself as the authentic representative of the nation.⁵ These maneuvers were on display during the Gezi protests when Prime Minister Erdoğan organized a mass gathering of his own under the heading, “A Meeting that Respects the National Will.” In his speech, Erdoğan mentioned the military interventions that led to the execution of Prime Minister Menderes in 1961 and the banning of the Islamist Welfare Party in the late 1990s. He continued that on each occasion, “the nation” (*millet*) responded at the ballot box (Sabah Gazetesi 2013). AKP’s appeal to the history of state violence contributes to its own rendering of the national subject. We will have to look elsewhere for a frontal interrogation and productive repurposing of the minority’s negative historicity.

Finding an Interlocutor

Every week, a group called the Saturday Mothers hosts a public vigil to remember individuals who were forcibly detained by security forces, disappeared, and are now presumed dead. Many of the disappearances took place in the 1980s and 90s, and in most cases, neither the bones of the dead have been returned to their families, nor have the perpetrators been brought to justice.⁶ The Saturday Mothers are largely Kurdish, and so they speak from a similar history of violence that provided a context for Demirtaş’ speech described above. As Kurds, they have never been formally classed as “minorities” in Turkey, but in drawing attention to the systematic

⁵ In their analysis of Erdoğan’s populism, Aytaç and Öniş (2014: 45) excerpt an apposite quotation from one of his speeches: “My story is the story of this people. Either the people will win and come to power, or the pretentious and oppressive minority — estranged from the reality of Anatolia and looking over it with disdain — will remain in power.”

⁶ The Saturday Mothers saw the well known Argentine group, Madres de Plaza de Mayo, as a model to follow. For a helpful discussion of similarities and differences between the two groups, see Baydar and İvegen 2006.

nature of what might otherwise appear to be an aberrant practice of enforced disappearance, the Saturday Mothers have struggled to expose and stage for public display the biopolitical liminality more commonly associated with minorities.⁷

The mothers started to hold these weekly gatherings in 1995 and eventually stopped in 1999 because of the repressive police force they confronted. They resumed them again in 2009, and while their gatherings these days by and large do not incur state intervention, police forces invariably arrive prior to their public rallies and make their presence felt by standing about a hundred yards away. The mothers' activities long precede the Gezi events. In Istanbul, they gather on İstiklal Avenue, the central pedestrian thoroughfare where the Gezi protests were most active.⁸

At these events, participants commonly talk about relatives and friends who were forcibly disappeared, but during the summer of 2013, they were also talking about the individuals who had died during the Gezi events. In reference to those protestors, one participant said, "the scenario hasn't changed, only the players have changed." The violence unto death doled out by security forces in Gezi is a pattern that the Saturday Mothers have witnessed for decades.

Another participant commented on the fact that the prime minister recently made a speech in a Kurdish-majority province about the ongoing peace process that the ruling government has pursued with the PKK. Prime Minister Erdoğan reportedly said, "spring has come to the

⁷ See Bargu 2014 for an account that situates enforced disappearance not as aberrant to the rule of law in modern states but as integral to a broader "politics of erasure" at work in the exercise of state sovereignty.

⁸ Other Saturday Mothers groups organize activities in a number of provinces in Turkey, especially in the Kurdish majority southeast, where many of the enforced disappearances took place.

mountains and mothers will no longer cry.” The speaker at the Saturday Mothers event responded to this statement, saying that in only one month five young people had been killed by the police. “Are their mothers not really mothers,” he demanded. Here again, the Gezi events came to be articulated to a longer history of state violence. In making that articulation, these participants identified a continuity with an earlier era of state power that the ruling government often claims to have superseded and left behind.

I asked one participant, who had been a member of the group since the 1990s and whose brother had been detained and killed by police forces in 1995, why speakers at these events persistently made reference to the Gezi protests. She responded that both cases — enforced disappearances and the current clashes between protestors and the police — involved the same phenomenon: state terror (*devlet terörü*). Another participant said that as a group that has known state violence intimately, they were calling for an end to the recent acts of police brutality.

This was not the first time the Saturday Mothers had acted in solidarity with a movement dedicated to protesting state violence, especially violence against minorities. Some members of the group have joined annual demonstrations to commemorate and mourn the assassination of Hrant Dink, the Armenian intellectual who had been prosecuted several times for “denigrating Turkishness” and was gunned down in 2007 by a right-wing nationalist, Oğün Samast. Photographs of Samast in custody, flanked by police officers proudly waving a Turkish flag, demonstrated to many critics that at least some members of the police supported the killer, and subsequently police officers working in intelligence units have been arrested as part of the official investigation into the murder. The connection drawn by the Mothers between these different episodes, linked by the rubric of “state terror,” exposes a specific form of violence, a

mode of officially sanctioned death-dealing against communities whose loyalty and obedience is taken by state authorities to be in doubt.

The historical sensibility evinced in the Saturday Mothers gatherings in 2013 was evident not only in their comments on state violence and its precedents in the Kurdish southeast, but also in a number of comments focused on the gatherings themselves and the mode of address they have been developing for the past twenty years. One participant exclaimed that they have been coming to this location for a long time and only now, with the Gezi protests, are they discovering to whom they have been speaking all this time. In a more muted tone, another participant asked, “why have we been sitting here? No one has heard our voice... People come and go [past us] but without hearing our voice, and nothing has been done.” Pressing the point further, she later merged her concerns about enforced disappearances in the Kurdish southeast with the Gezi protests: “What happened in Gezi park... They were sitting in the shade over there. What was over there, was it a war? We say to everyone, listen to our voices..., end this war, let mothers laugh a little.” The term, war, comes to carry the dual connotations of the three-decade armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, on the one hand, and the excessive response of the police to protestors in the park, on the other.

It is undoubtedly the case that, as with any act of public address, the speech act is heard and taken up by a range of differently positioned actors. In many respects, their voices have reverberated more strongly in international settings than in domestic ones: Amnesty International organized sit-ins in Paris, Berlin, Sydney, and London to support the gatherings in Istanbul; the International Human Rights Association awarded the mothers the Carl Von Ossietzky Prize; and they were the subject of a documentary by a European filmmaker (Baydar and İvegen 2006: 696-697). It is nonetheless striking that many in the group, when speaking about how they have been

received in the domestic arena, claim not to have been heard. They indicate that the very interlocutory scene that their vigils presuppose has by and large not been recognized by their presumed addressees in the mainstream Turkish public. The issue is not only that they have struggled to motivate legislators to reform criminal law or to inspire public prosecutors to raise cases against state officials. Beyond this legal impasse, the dilemma to which they are pointing is that members of the putative Turkish majority have largely failed to respond to the ethical claims that the mothers have sought to make upon them. Their acts of address, iterated across years of weekly speech acts, carry the burden of creating a context of interlocution that otherwise does not exist. The speech act presupposes a context of intelligibility it must in fact produce. This paradox of performativity is generative rather than simply stifling. The ethical impetus that animates these gatherings derives from the gap between the existing and posited contexts of public encounter.

To draw this argument out, it is helpful to note that scholars who have analyzed the Saturday Mothers have broached questions concerning the ethics of the group's public presence largely by analyzing the gendered politics of "motherhood." If some have argued that the group "revolutionizes the traditional maternal role" (Arat 1999: 376), others have worried that the moral resonance of motherhood risks de-politicizing the gatherings (Baydar and İvegen 2006). The idea of mothers-in-mourning seems to domesticate, within traditional gender relations, what might otherwise be taken as a deeply political protest against the violent abuses of state power. State authorities themselves appear to be vexed by this performance of mourning, adopting conflicting positions on its legitimacy. At certain moments, they have permitted the mothers to convene in public with little harassment. At other times, police forces have aggressively intervened, even attacking members of the group, and on occasion detaining some participants

on charges that they aid and abet terrorism.⁹ Ignored and harassed, permitted and repressed, the gatherings are ethically unsettling for state authorities and much of the mainstream Turkish public.

The tensions elicited by the mothers are least in part the result of how the Turkish state has invested in the morality of motherhood. The militarized masculinity of Turkish nationalism has presupposed a feminine counterpart, whether in the form of daughters, capable in some cases of participation in the military, or more commonly, in the form of mothers, who supported and “reproduced” the military nation (Altnay 2004).¹⁰ The recursive loop that links the morality of motherhood to the politics of national sovereignty was reactivated in the 1990s when Turkish media outlets began to report on a group of Turkish mothers who met in a cemetery on Fridays to collectively mourn the deaths of sons who, as Turkish soldiers, died as “martyrs” in the armed conflict with the PKK. Zeynep Gülru Göker (2011a: 170) notes that in nationalist media portrayals, the “mothers of the martyred” were explicitly set in contrast with the Saturday Mothers, in effect constructing a “hierarchy of grief.”

⁹ Following Banu Karaca’s (2011) insightful analysis of censorship in Turkey’s art world, we might interpret this seemingly confused and arbitrary policy as consequential in its effect of systematically discouraging dissent. Police harassment of the mothers’ gatherings spiked in 1998 and 1999. On the two-hundredth week, the group suspended the vigils. At that point, 431 people had been arrested, some had been remanded in custody for up to five days, and forty participants were put on trial (Göker 2011b: 114).

¹⁰ Prime Minister Erdoğan’s own chauvinistic displays of masculinity became an object of both ridicule and criticism in the course of the Gezi protests. See Açıksöz and Korkman (2013) for a perceptive reading of the use of satire in the protests. They also describe how feminist and LGBT protestors challenged the often homophobic, trans-phobic, and sexist speech of some of the satirists.

The Saturday Mothers invoke recognizable tropes of motherhood — of an emotional, moral obligation toward sons — and yet repudiate militarism’s gendered narrative of national reproduction. Their public vigils are uncanny — familiar, yet alien — to many in the Turkish public, including state authorities, because they rely on what is conventional in them: the dissident demanding that state officials be brought to justice is at the same moment a mother calling for public acknowledgment of her moral claim to mourn her child’s death.

The Saturday Mothers hold out an ethical provocation to those who would identify with the Turkish majority — a provocation to which, according to some in the group, few within that majority have been willing to rise: to recognize the moral claim of the mothers’ mourning and, in doing so, to denounce the violence of the state that acts in that majority’s name. If many in the mothers group have worried over finding an interlocutor, the issue is only in part about the way that state authorities and media outlets have censored or silenced their voice. We might interpret the assertion referenced above, that the mothers are only now finding an interlocutor, in a way that foregrounds the ethical burden placed on those who view themselves as part of the Turkish majority: what process of self-transformation would be necessary for members of that public to become responsive to the mothers and capable of seizing the moral claim put before them? What would members of that majority need to become in order to see the decades-old struggle of the Saturday Mothers as part of their own political experience, formative of an expectation to come?

From Minority to Majority

As the Gezi protests unfolded, there was considerable commentary in Turkish news outlets and blogs about the extent of Kurdish involvement. Some protestors or sympathizers, who have seen Kurds rise up en masse to protest state violence on countless previous occasions, were

frustrated that Kurdish cities had not displayed the bold street politics for which they have often been known. Others countered this depiction of Kurdish disinterest by pointing to the fact that politicians from the pro-Kurdish BDP participated in the stand-off at the park or otherwise voiced support.¹¹

Demirtaş, the Kurdish politician whose speech I mentioned at the outset of this essay, was not dismissive of the Gezi protest but nor did he celebrate it. Rather than addressing the question of why Kurds were not more forcefully joining the protests, he reversed the frame, stressing that Turks were only now seeing what their state was capable of doing to its own citizens and that they were only now experiencing a historical reality that Kurds had long known. In this, Demirtaş echoed a sentiment that appears to have been widespread in many Kurdish regions of the country. Two ethnographers, Fırat Bozcalı and Çağrı Yoltar (2013), describe the hesitancy, even resentment, that many Kurds felt toward the protests: “Police brutality, arbitrary arrests, extra-legal killings, and media censorship—all that is new and eye opening to the majority of Gezi protestors—have long become facts of life in Turkey’s Kurdistan” (see also Karakaş 2013).

In his speech, Demirtaş turned this hesitancy into an ethical demand upon the would-be majority in a way that resembled, even if it was not altogether identical with, the discourse of the Saturday Mothers. While Demirtaş was not appealing to tropes of motherhood, he made recourse to a history of violence in order to recast the space of experience out of which the current conflagration around Gezi Park emerged. Recall that he began by describing the bombing in Roboski village, framing that event as a precedent for the more recent acts of state violence against Gezi protestors. What makes this framing contentious is the way that it serves to ground

¹¹ Aktan (2013) argues that the very questioning of the Kurds’ presence in the protest was in part the product of and helped to reinforce a political framework supported by Turkish nationalists.

a horizon of expectation. The contentious character of this narrative tethering of memory to anticipation became apparent in the course of his speech, as his tone shifted from historical description to moral admonishment. It was marked grammatically, as he began to directly address the second person “you:”

As with groups in power in the past, the habit of lying that we find in this [governing] power has a counterpart among the people [...] I wish to remind especially those who support the prime minister and nourish his lies [...] He lied that ‘the BDP [Demirtaş’ political party] coercively gathers votes... that it pays children to throw stones,’ and you believed it (*siz inandınız*) [...] He said that during the hunger strike [among Kurdish prisoners in 2012], ‘they are eating inside’; you believed it (*siz inandınız*) [...] He lied in Roboski, you believed it (*inandınız*) [...] Now it’s emerged that he lied that [Gezi protestors] were drinking alcohol in a mosque [where they were given shelter and medical care], and as if this was the first time he’s lied, you started to raise objections. (Demirtaş 2013)

The repetition of the phrase, *you believed it*, functions poetically, in Roman Jakobson’s (1960: 369) sense: the rhythmical and patterned parallelism fosters “interaction between meter and meaning.”¹² The repetition of the phrase concentrates attention upon itself, and more specifically on the denotationally unspecified deictic, “you.” To whom is he directing this reprimand?

At the start, it is clear that Demirtaş is talking about supporters of the Prime Minister and his political party. However, as he continues, the *you* he is challenging assumes bigger proportions.

Will you still believe the lie that ‘Armenians went around from one place to another, sometimes along the way, because of some problems, a few people were killed’? Or will you

¹² On Jakobson’s concepts of parallelism and poetics, see Caton 1987; Silverstein 1993.

hear the truth that they suffered an officially [organized] genocide, they were officially eliminated? Alevis in Dersim, Maraş, Çorum, Sivas, Gazi were killed at the hand of official state policy. Will you now believe this truth?” (Demirtaş 2013)

The events he is mentioning — the Armenian genocide of the early twentieth century and violence against Alevis in the 1930s, 1970s, and 1990s — all preceded the rise of the AKP-led ruling government. They involved a constellation of state authorities and political parties that embraces much of the field of mainstream politics, across the landscape of political groups that otherwise claim to oppose one another. The lies to which Demirtaş is alluding refer to official state ideology; they are part and parcel of the ascription of negative historicity to the minority. Turkey’s current government is not the origin of those lies but has continued the tradition of adhering to them. The elision of these events of historical violence from public memory has been supported or tacitly accepted by secularists as much as Islamists, by right-wing nationalists as much as left-leaning liberals. Demirtaş’s admonishment, here, seemed to extend not only to AKP’s electoral base but even to some of those who were involved in the protests, including Kemalists and other nationalists. When he says, “you believed it,” the *you* includes anyone who would identify with a national horizon of expectation, without interrogating the experiences of violence that have produced it.

These events of violence are, arguably, foundational in the history of the body politic. The violence against Armenians mentioned in the speech occurred in the waning years of the empire, in the very years when ethnic nationalism was feverishly adopted by imperial elites, and which proved consequential in entrenching the ideological terms of nation-state formation in the years that followed. The episodes of violence targeting Alevis that Demirtaş mentioned took place later, but in the speech itself, he invokes a string of cities (Dersim, Maraş, Çorum, etc.)

immediately after mentioning the “official elimination” of Armenians. The cities become emblems of those episodes of violence, and they appear, in the speech, as so many iterations of the founding genocide of the republic. The speech offers a history of the Gezi protests that begins not with the ruling party and its belligerent leader, nor with the neoliberal turn in state policy, but with the constituting moment of the republic itself. It implicates the form of the body politic as such, including its “counterpart among the people,” who have been empowered to speak as a sovereign nation.

The political party that Demirtaş represented was the loudest voice in mainstream politics to speak on behalf of rights and freedoms for Kurds: cultural and linguistic rights (the right to use Kurdish in elementary schools, political campaigns, and courtrooms); rights for self-governance (in proposals to decentralize certain aspects of governance to provincial levels); and the granting of amnesty to political prisoners and releasing the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, from solitary confinement. In this particular speech, he was not primarily concerned with these issues, which are often glossed as the “Kurdish question,” but with what we might call a Turkish question.¹³ He made an appeal to the putative majority not simply to question state violence, by for instance recognizing the killing of Armenians as a genocide. This was not a project aimed at redeeming the nation in a liberal vintage that is more inclusive and less authoritarian. The persistent dilemma with that kind of liberalism, in Turkey as elsewhere, is that it remains premised on the perspective of the majority, which can then offer or withhold tolerance to the marginalized (Brown 2006). The often unacknowledged statist commitments of that sort of liberalism reinforce, rather than scrutinize, the split between the progressive historicity of the

¹³ To the extent that the so-called Kurdish question already implicates the formation of the Turkish state and the policing of its material and imaginative boundaries, it is always already a “Turkish question.” On this point, see Özsoy 2013.

nation and the negative historicity of the minority. Demirtaş's demand went further, admonishing the would-be majority for failing to push the critique of violence to the point where it implicates its own constitution as an ethnic majority. He summoned the majority to develop a critique of violence that not only condemns the ruling government, but one that leads to a self-transformation, where it might question the very aspiration to majority-status.

A Polemical Ethics

There has been a flurry of debates about political futures after Gezi, much of which has centered on how the oppositional spirit of the protest might be preserved or harnessed after its conclusion. Would the uprisings yield electoral consequences damaging to the ruling party? What alternate forms of politics, outside of the ballot box, could be developed in order to reactivate its energy and its collaborative ethos? Or, scaling up, in what ways were the protests contributing to a global movement of resistance, connected to anti-austerity protests in southern Europe, the occupy movement in North America, or the protests around public transportation in Brazil, to name just a few?¹⁴ The materials I have been examining in this essay permit us to remain sensitive to somewhat different questions, attuned to the temporal conditions of possibility for such debates: whose experience matters and to which political future?

The Gezi park protests could, for instance, be interpreted as a relatively spontaneous uprising, against the current ruling government, its increasing controls on public sociability, its embrace of neoliberal political-economic measures, and its intensifying hostility towards

¹⁴ This debate has not only taken place in Turkey or among intellectuals that hail from the country. It has taken place in venues representing a global audience (whether in popular media such as *The Guardian* or in more academic journals, like *New Left Review*), and has drawn in the voices of intellectuals who claim a global audience, like Slavoj Žižek and Michael Hardt.

political opponents. But if, following the Saturday Mothers, we view the police actions in Gezi park as continuous with a space of experience that includes the enforced disappearances in the 1980s and 1990s, then how would the target of the critique shift and where would the burden of responsibility for violence fall? In what ways would some of the protestors themselves, including especially those who identify as members of the Turkish majority, be implicated in the tradition of state violence being renewed by the government today? If, following Demirtaş, we wrote the history of the Gezi uprisings by beginning with the foundational violence of the Armenian genocide, then how would the horizon of expectation emerging from the current protests be altered?

There is an ethical contentiousness to these questions that would be elided if, with Ernesto Laclau (2005), we rushed to discern the chains of equivalence emerging between different social and political communities. That sort of theorization could offer a plausible explanation of the pluralistic character of the protests, in which a wide variety of otherwise distinct, sometimes rival, political communities contingently articulated their disparate demands with one another, under the sign of Gezi Park and against the ruling government.¹⁵ I am not, however, convinced that when the mothers and Demirtaş drew comparisons between historical events of state violence and the current confrontations with police brutality, their aim was simply to help develop a popular bloc of opposition. Rather than investing in the signifier of Gezi Park, their queries interrogated the ethical demands that an emergent political connection should make on

¹⁵ Images juxtaposing signs of Turkish and Kurdish nationalism became iconic of this collaborative pluralism: for instance, one photo depicted two protestors fleeing hand-in-hand from water cannons, one carrying a BDP flag, the other holding a flag with Atatürk's image. Another frequently circulated photo showed a man holding a portrait of Mustafa Kemal sharing space with another holding a banner that displayed Abdullah Öcalan.

the majority — of its responsiveness to forms of political identification that the state has long labeled as terrorism; of its willingness to claim responsibility for acts of violence committed by the state in its name.

Judith Butler takes us somewhat closer to the matter at hand by outlining a notion of political obligation in terms of shared vulnerability to violence. She not only moves away from historically resonant notions of substantive (ethnic, religious, linguistic) unity but calls for a conception of political relationality that arises precisely when more conventionally nationalist notions of identification are put into question: “What is our responsibility... toward those who seem to test our sense of belonging or to defy available norms of likeness” (Butler 2009: 36)? The commentaries that I have discussed center attention on shared vulnerability, and they largely avoid drawing on the worn tropes of national indivisibility as the ground of political unity. Instead they highlight the increasing impossibility for those in the would-be majority to escape the violent address of security forces. State violence is not just under indictment; it leaves in its wake the terrain on which a new political community might be identified.

Certain moments of protest during the Gezi events in fact sought to build new forms of political connection on the basis of a shared vulnerability to the ongoing violence. After Medeni Yıldırım, an eighteen year old Kurd, was killed in the largely Kurdish town of Lice while protesting the building of a military outpost, Gezi protestors in Istanbul, Ankara, and elsewhere began to incorporate Yıldırım and Lice in their slogans. Protestors in Kadıköy, a neighborhood of Istanbul known for its middle-class, secular-nationalist Turkish inhabitants, were reportedly chanting the Kurdish phrase, *Bijî biratiya gelan* (Long live the brotherhood of the peoples), as well as a Turkish-language slogan of solidarity, *Diren Lice, Kadıköy seninle* (Resist Lice, Kadıköy is with you) (Schafers and İleengiz 2013). The term, brotherhood, may be irreparably

compromised by the patriarchal ethno-nationalism that has defined its dominant usage, but its invocation in Kurdish and its coupling with a pluralized “peoples” suggest that critical labor is being performed upon the concept itself. In a context where the public use of Kurdish has been banned, censored, and discouraged, and where political officials have been accused of aiding terrorism because of their choice of linguistic code (see Jamison forthcoming), these gestures evince a sense of responsibility toward those who unsettle “available norms of likeness.”

The question that remains pressing and open to dispute is how any such invocation of shared experience indexes an anticipated future. The commentaries on common vulnerability that I have examined in this essay harbor a polemical ethics, whose force derives from the way they recast the temporal valence of the minority. Demirtaş and the mothers’ respective discourses convey a normative, indeed ethical, charge because they ask the majority to see its own horizon of expectation defined anew, not in relation to the privileged past of the nation but through an experience of state violence more commonly reserved for the minority. Demirtaş and the mothers do not present the negative historicity of the minority simply as an outrageous violation of the republic’s highest ideals; that outrage stands as a precedent that anticipates a political community to come. More than becoming sensitive to the plight of the minority, the would-be majority is asked to see the minority’s past as prefiguring the form of its own political future.

If we were to discern in these critical discourses a nascent form of political community-in-the-making, we would have to begin with the unsettling, even paradoxical, notion that the subject of politics they project is formed on the basis of exclusions that were constitutive of “the people” in the republican state. This vexed reassessment of experience and expectation suggests that the oppressed minority stands as a model for the political identification of the majority and dispossession undergirds political subjectivity. Perhaps we need a formulation that, evoking the

dialectical tension that animates the materials presented here, would summon the ethnic and gendered politics of the nation-state but only to mark their negation. A brotherhood of the abject, let us say, which can even incorporate the dominant majority, but only to the degree that it too has faced the violence of the state as a precondition for its entry into politics.

References

- Açıksöz, Salih Can and Zeynep Korkman. 2013. "Masculinized Power, Queered Resistance." *Fieldsites - Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology Online*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/395-masculinized-power-queered-resistance>.
- Adams, Vincanne, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke. 2009. "Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality." *Subjectivity* 28 (1): 246-265.
- Ahıska, Meltem. 2010. *Occidentalism in Turkey: Questions of Modernity and National Identity in Turkish Radio Broadcasting*. New York: I.B. Tauris Academic Studies.
- Aktan, İrfan. 2013. "Gezi, Kürtlerin de Parkı." *Bir+Bir*, 27 June, 2013, <http://birdirbir.org/gezi-kurtlerin-de-parkidir/> (accessed 25 January 2015).
- Altınay, Ayşe Gül. 2004. *The Myth of the Military Nation: Militarism, Gender, and Education in Turkey*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Amnesty International. 2013. *Gezi Park Protests: Brutal Denial of the Right to Peaceful Assembly in Turkey*. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/eur440222013en.pdf> (accessed 16 December 2014).
- . 2014. *Adding Injustice to Injury: One Year on from the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey*. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR44/010/2014/en/82acd54b-cb1a-4918-be8c-64c528ab1467/eur440102014en.pdf> (accessed 16 December 2014).
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2013. *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. New York: Verso.
- Arat, Yeşim. 1999. "Democracy and Women in Turkey: In Defense of Liberalism." *Social Politics* 6 (3): 370-387.
- Aytaç, S. Erdem and Ziya Öniş. 2014. "Varieties of Populism in a Changing Global Context: The Divergent Paths of Erdoğan and *Kirchnerismo*." *Comparative Politics* 47 (1): 41-59.
- Bargu, Banu. 2014. "Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances." *Qui Parle* 23 (1): 35-75.

Baydar, Gülsüm, and Berfin İvegen. 2006. "Territories, Identities, and Thresholds: The Saturday Mothers Phenomenon in İstanbul." *Signs* 31 (3): 689-715.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Bozcalı, Fırat and Çağrı Yoltar. 2013. "A Look at Gezi Park from Turkey's Kurdistan." *Fieldsites - Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology Online*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/396-a-look-at-gezi-park-from-turkey-s-kurdistan>.

Brown, Wendy. 2006. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bryant, Rebecca. 2012. "Partitions of Memory: Wounds and Witnessing in Cyprus." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2): 332-360.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso.

Caton, Steven. 1987. "Contributions of Roman Jakobson." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16: 223-260.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deeb, Lara. 2009. "Emulating and/or Embodying the Ideal: The Gendering of Temporal Frameworks and Islamic Role Models in Shi'i Lebanon." *American Ethnologist* 36 (2): 242-257.

Demirtaş, Selahattin. 2013. BDP Grup Toplantısı. 18 June, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=6WXaA7yaNd8 (accessed 30 June 2013).

Dole, Christopher. 2012. *Healing Secular Life: Loss and Devotion in Modern Turkey*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ekmekçioğlu, Lerna. 2014. "Republic of Paradox: The League of Nations Minority Protection Regime and the New Turkey's Step-Citizens." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (4): 657-679.

Ferguson, James. 1999. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Göker, Zeynep Gülru. 2011a. "The Politics of Silence: Discussing Deliberative and Agonistic Democracy vis-a-vis Gendered Responses to the Militarization of Everyday Life in Turkey." Ph.D Dissertation, CUNY.

———. 2011b. "Presence in Silence: Feminist and Democratic Implications of the Saturday Vigils in Turkey." In *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel. Pp. 107-124. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jakobson, Roman. 1960. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." In *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Pp. 350-377. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press.

Jamison, Kelda. Forthcoming. "Hefty Dictionaries in Incomprehensible Tongues: Commensurating Code and Language Community in Turkey." *Anthropological Quarterly*.

Karaca, Banu. 2011. "Images Delegitimized and Discouraged: Explicitly Political Art and the Arbitrariness of the Unspeakable." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45: 155-183.

Karakaş, Burcu. 2013. "Gezi, Kürtler ve Bizim Çocuklar." *Bianet*, June 21, 2013, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/147798-gezi-kurtler-ve-bizim-cocuklar> (accessed 21 June 2013).

Koselleck, Reinhart. 2004. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2012. "Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2): 418-446.

Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mazower, Mark. 1997. "Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe." *Daedalus* 126 (2): 47-63.

Mazzarella, William. 2004. "Culture, Globalization, Mediation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345-367.

Özsoy, Hisyar. 2013. "Introduction: The Kurds' Ordeal with Turkey in a Transforming Middle East." *Dialectical Anthropology* 37 (1): 103-111.

Paker, Evren Balta. 2010. "Dış Tehditten İç Tehdide: Türkiye'de Doksanlarda Ulusal Güvenliğin Yeniden İnşası." In *Türkiye'de Ordu, Devlet ve Güvenlik Siyaseti*, eds. Evren Balta Paker and İsmet Akça. Pp. 407-431. Istanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları.

Piot, Charles. 2010. *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Rodrigue, Aron. 2013. "Reflections on Millets and Minorities: Ottoman Legacies," in *Turkey Between Nationalism and Globalization*, ed. Riva Kastoryano. Pp. 36-46. New York: Routledge.
- Sabah Gazetesi. 2013. "Başbakan Erdoğan Kazlıçeşme'de Konuştu." 16 June 2013, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2013/6/16/basbakan-erdogan-kazlicesmede-konusuyor> (accessed 16 December 2014).
- Schafers, Marlene and Çiçek İleğiz. 2013. "Improbable Encounters: Marching for Lice in Kadıköy." *Fieldsites - Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology Online*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/404-improbable-encounters-marching-for-lice-in-kadikoy>.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1993. "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function." In *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed John Lucy. Pp. 33-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tambar, Kabir. 2014. *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Tuğal, Cihan. " 'Resistance Everywhere': The Gezi Revolt in Global Perspective." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 49: 157-172.
- Türk Tabipleri Birliği. 2013. "Göstericilerin Sağlık Durumları." 1 August 2013, <http://www.ttb.org.tr/index.php/Haberler/veri-3944.html> (accessed 16 December 2014).
- Weitz, Eric D. 2008. "From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions." *The American Historical Review* 113 (5): 1313-1343.
- Yeğen, Mesut. 2007. " 'Jewish-Kurds' or the New Frontiers of Turkishness." *Patterns of Prejudice* 41 (1): 1-20.
- Yörük, Erdem and Murat Yüksel. 2014. "Class and Politics in Turkey's Gezi Protests." *New Left Review* 89: 103-123.