

## REVOLTAS POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEAS NUMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

# Making sense of the protests in Turkey (and Brazil): contesting neo-liberal urbanism in ‘Rebel Cities’

*Entendendo o sentido dos protestos na Turquia  
(e no Brasil): a contestação do urbanismo neoliberal  
nas “Cidades Rebeldes”*

*Comprender el significado de las protestas en Turquía  
(y Brasil): la contestación del urbanismo neoliberal  
en las “ciudades rebeldes”*

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**Abstract:** The article is organised in five parts: first, we offer a brief overview of the protests and the concept of the ‘right to the city’; second, we discuss arguments about the role of democracy and representation, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s authoritarian leadership style in relation to the cause of the protests; third, we put forward our case for comparing the protests with those which occurred in similarly rising economies, namely Brazil, rather than the demonstrations that occurred in countries experiencing a downward economic turn; fourth, we explore the role of young people in the protests; and finally, we look at where the movement is now.

**Keywords:** Turkey; popular protests; urbanization; democratization.

**Resumo:** O artigo está organizado em cinco partes: primeiro, oferecemos um breve resumo dos protestos e o conceito de “direito à cidade”; segundo, discutimos argumentos sobre o papel da democracia e representação, e estilo de liderança autoritário do Primeiro-Ministro da Turquia Recep Tayyip Erdogan em relação à causa dos protestos; terceiro, apresentamos nosso caso ao comparar

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os protestos com aqueles ocorridos em economias emergentes semelhantes, como o Brasil. Ou seja, em vez das manifestações que ocorreram em países que experimentam uma curva de declínio económico; quarto, exploramos o papel dos jovens nos protestos; e, finalmente, olhamos para onde o movimento está agora.

**Palavras-chave:** Turquia; protestos populares; urbanização; democratização.

**Resumen:** El trabajo está organizado en cinco partes: En primer lugar, ofrecemos un breve resumen de las protestas y el concepto de “derecho a la ciudad”; En segundo lugar, se discuten los argumentos sobre el papel de la democracia y la representación y el estilo de liderazgo autoritario del Primer Ministro de Turquía, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a la causa de las protestas; tercero, presentamos nuestro caso al comparar las protestas a los ocurridos en economías emergentes similares, como Brasil, es decir, en lugar de los hechos ocurridos en los países que experimentan una curva de declinación económica; cuarto, se explora el papel de los jóvenes en las protestas; y, por último, nos fijamos en donde el movimiento es ahora.

**Palabras clave:** Turquía; protestas; la urbanización; la democratización.

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Many mainstream accounts of the Taksim-Gezi park protests that took place in Turkey in 2013, have made reference to the so-called Arab Spring events in Middle Eastern and North African countries. The same question was asked across a number of these accounts: Are the Taksim Protests Turkey’s ‘Arab Spring’? (SADIKI, 2013; SEYMOUR 2013; CELIK, 2013; MOUKALLED, 2013). Other accounts place the Taksim-Gezi park protests in the category of the Occupy/anti-austerity protests that have taken place in the US and Europe - particularly since 2010 - against large scale public spending cuts and rising unemployment rates, especially for the young population in these countries. In this article, we explore some of the claims that underpin the categorisations of the Taksim protests as either a ‘Turkish Spring’ or part of a global Occupy movement. Drawing on British geographer David Harvey’s concept of the ‘right to the city’ we argue that the protests were sparked by processes of neoliberal urbanization and therefore cannot be categorised as Turkey’s ‘Spring’. But distinctions also need to be made between the Taksim-Gezi protests and the demonstrations that have taken place in countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, since Turkey’s economic and political situation differs markedly from these crisis-ridden contexts. The article is organised in five parts: first, we offer a brief overview of the protests and the concept of the ‘right to the city’; second, we discuss arguments about the role of democracy and representation,

and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's authoritarian leadership style in relation to the cause of the protests; third, we put forward our case for comparing the protests with those which occurred in similarly rising economies, namely Brazil, rather than the demonstrations that occurred in countries experiencing a downward economic turn; fourth, we explore the role of young people in the protests; and finally, we look at where the movement is now.

### **Taksim-Gezi 2013**

The protests began on 27 May 2013 as a small campaign against redevelopment. The initial aim of those who gathered in Taksim square was to stop developers from building an Ottoman-style shopping-centre that was to be housed in a replica of a military barracks building demolished sixty years ago. The main objection of the protestors was that the building of the shopping centre would result in the destruction of much of Gezi Park, one of the last green spots in central Istanbul (Europe's biggest city and the business capital of Turkey). There are numerous shopping malls in Istanbul, at least one in every neighbourhood, but only very few public green spaces left. However, the character of the protests changed when the Turkish police attacked demonstrators with considerable force and what started out as an environmental protest in Istanbul quickly turned into a nation-wide political demonstration against the policies of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and his government. The protest rapidly gained support from a cross-section of society in Istanbul and other urban centres leading to what was arguably the largest wave of protests in recent Turkish history. An estimated 3.5 million people took part in the protests over the course of following few months. The protests were generally led and dominated by young middle class professionals and university students, and while they expressed a wide range of demands including wider access to resources and freedom of expression, a new kind of urban living remained at the centre of the events. Our contention, drawing on Harvey, is that issues related to the city and its quality of life dominated the protests.

David Harvey attempts, in his book, *Rebel Cities*, to integrate his theory of urbanization into the 'general laws of motion' of capital, to provide a framework for analysing the current crisis of capitalism and the development of neoliberal trends in the world. In Harvey's analysis, urbanization is both the product of and the driving force for the

absorption of ‘surplus product’ in the process of capital accumulation. For Harvey, “to claim the right to the city ... is to claim some kind of shaping power over the process of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and so in a fundamental and radical way” (HARVEY, 2012, p. 5).<sup>1</sup> Harvey seeks to root the term in the concrete reality of class struggle, claiming that the right to the city does not “arise primarily out of various intellectual fascinations and fads ... It primarily rises up from the streets, out from the neighbourhoods, as a cry for help and sustenance by oppressed peoples in desperate times” (HARVEY, 2012, p. xiii). For Harvey, “Urbanization ... has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses, at ever increasing geographical scales, but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that have dispossessed the masses of any right to the city whatsoever” (HARVEY, 2012, p. 22).

It is no coincidence that the demonstrations started and were concentrated in Istanbul, the largest and the most developed urban centre in Turkey. Istanbul is a unique example of contemporary urban development with the wide-scale urban transformation and regeneration projects in place. It was in the 1980s, soon after the military coup in Turkey, that the city witnessed the beginning of the neoliberal transformation and the celebration of property rights, in line with transformations that occurred in other metropolitan centres such as New York, London and Madrid.

Metropolitan cities now have central significance in the system of global capitalist surplus production. Harvey writes,

it is the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labour expended on and in the city. The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have had a part in producing it. This is, of course, the basis for the claim to the right to the city on the part of the collective labourers who have made it. The struggle for the right to the city is against the powers of capital that ruthlessly feed upon and extract rents from the common life that others have produced.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The phrase, ‘right to the city’, was coined by the Marxist urban theorist Henry Lefebvre in 1968 in response to the upsurge of urban struggle that exploded in France during May of that year.

<sup>2</sup> “The right to the city is not an exclusive individual right, but a focused collective right. It is inclusive not only of construction workers but also of all those who facilitate the reproduction of daily life: the caregivers and teachers, the sewer and subway repair men, the plumbers and electricians, the scaffold erectors and crane operators, the hospital workers and the truck, bus, and taxi drivers, the restaurant workers and the entertainers, the bank clerks and the city administrators.” (HARVEY, 2012, p. 78 & 137)

In this sense, the Taksim-Gezi protests share common ground with a great many diverse social movements focusing on the urban question, from India and Brazil to China, Spain, Argentina and the US.<sup>3</sup> Just a few months before the Taksim-Gezi protests started, David Harvey spoke about the urban origins of the social movements and referred to Istanbul's rapid urbanization, asking "What do we see in Istanbul? Cranes, everywhere." (URBAN CLASS WARFARE..., 2013). According to Harvey, urbanization is a channel through which surplus capital flows to build/ re-build cities for those who can afford it. In his contribution to the analysis of contemporary capitalist production process, such urban re-generation is a powerful and essential process that in return defines what contemporary cities are about, as well as determining who can afford to live in these redesigned urban spaces and who cannot. The cities also happen to be the quintessential places where the contestation of neoliberal urbanization may take place in various forms and intensities. On the basis of this analysis, Harvey highlights the importance of challenging the state and addresses the ever-changing ideal of the city and the social groups that sustain and contest it.

## **Democracy and 'representation'**

Some of those hasty proclamations of a 'Turkish Spring' that we mentioned in our introduction to this chapter, concentrate on Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly anti-democratic and authoritarian ruling style. They compare Erdogan's rule with that of former president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak. The slogan: "Taksim will become Tahrir" encapsulated the claim that the Taksim protests represent the next stage of the 'Arab Spring'.<sup>4</sup>

Since Erdogan prides himself on being a democratically elected leader with strong grassroots support, his critics now pose questions such as how to define majority in representative democracies and whether a regime can still be considered a representative democracy when it does

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<sup>3</sup> This is in line with David Harvey's reworking of Marxist political theory which places the city first and foremost, in terms of its position as a generator of capital accumulation, as opposed to the factory/ work place. Harvey explains that "the concept of work has to shift from a narrow definition attaching to industrial forms of labor to the far broader terrain of the work entailed in the production and reproduction of an increasingly urbanized daily life" (HARVEY, 2012, p. 138). Harvey also discusses how urbanization will play a key role in social conflicts of today.

<sup>4</sup> 'Comrades from Cairo' (*Mosireen*) a non-profit media collective in Cairo born out of the explosion of citizen media and cultural activism in Egypt during the uprising against Mubarak 'From Taksim and Rio to Tahrir, the smell of teargas. Open letter by the Egyptian activist collective from Cairo', 29 June 2013, in *ROAR Magazine*.

not follow policies to serve the interests of the majority. It is reasonable to suggest that the 12 year long to date, AKP rule, has not led to the creation of a fair distribution of income; the benefits of huge economic success were not shared equitably by all strata of the population, and as far as the *Human Development Index* is concerned Turkey is still a very unequal country (MALIK, 2013). Most of the policies of the AKP favour the new bourgeoisie, the extended middle and upper middle classes rather than the vast majority of the working people. We agree with these observations. However, these observations are not directly relevant in terms of whether the AKP (Justice and Development Party) regime represents the interests of majority in Turkey's representative democracy.

'Democracy' means government (power) by the people. The term democracy is normally employed to designate the parliamentary regimes which developed in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century on the 'British model' (BESLEY; COATE, 1998, p. 139-156. GERMAÏN, 1948). Representative democracy refers to a system of government in which representatives are elected by popular vote. These representatives then poll their constituents on the various matters and represent them in the large meeting called the parliament. Representative democracy is the basis of constitutional democracy existing in many Western countries. All those countries which call themselves democratic have a representative system of democracy. The insitutionalisation of this system of democracy is often justified on the basis that it is the only form of democracy which is viable in the larger and more complex societies of today. Even though representatives are chosen by the people to act in their best interest, this does not mean that they necessarily act the way the people want them to in every circumstance. Theoretically, power rests with the elected representatives, but this is evidently not the case since the policies implemented by governments may often be contrary to the interests of the working people, and almost always in line with the interests of the powerful big business. This is a form of democracy but quite different from straight-up majority rule. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville called the 'dictatorship of the majority' (HORWITZ, 1996, p. 293-307).<sup>5</sup>

An alternative system, participatory democracy, where members of the public are effectively members of the government by voting

<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville is either referring to John Adams coinage of the term in his "Reflections" or, perhaps more likely, to Edmund Burke's appropriation of Adams in his critique of the French Revolution "Reflections of the revolution in France"

directly on all policies, is widely recognised as the only ‘real’ form of democracy. However, this is often considered unpractical and difficult to administer and as a result, most modern democracies are representative. For the most part, the regimes exercise their hegemonic power moving between consent and coercion, which was once described by Antonio Gramsci as “half man, half beast” – Gramsci took this term over from Machiavelli as the image of power as a centaur, a necessary combination of consent and coercion (GILL, 1993, p. 52).

Turkey’s Tayyip Erdogan has been, by far, the most popular politician in Turkey after winning three consecutive elections and with an increasing majority: 34 per cent in 2002, 47 per cent in 2007 and more than 50 per cent in 2011. His success and popularity is interlinked with Turkey’s economic development: Erdogan’s leadership coincided with an impressive growth spurt for Turkey which placed the country among the top ten emerging stars of the world alongside with the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Turkey’s per capita income was tripled within a decade under Erdogan’s leadership. The annual economic output of the Turkish economy is, at \$10,000 per person, about the same level as Brazil or Mexico and has been growing at a steady pace.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside managing a growing economy, Erdogan’s government achieved significant political successes during this period. The AKP regime has been dealing effectively with the coup leaders of Turkey’s recent troubled past. A large number of generals were arrested, and one in three imprisoned. It was also under Erdogan’s leadership that significant steps were taken to calm the decades-long violent conflict with the country’s significant Kurdish minority (AMENDİNG TURKISH CONSTITUTION FOR KURDISH QUESTION, s.d.). However, these successes have fuelled Erdogan’s sense of his own importance in Turkey’s recent economic rise and a sense that he is invincible. His excessive use of the state apparatus to establish his power base to such excess has led to accusations that he is indeed governing the country in the same autocratic style for which he had bitterly criticised the secular generals. After 12 years and three terms in power the result is the emergence of an increasingly authoritarian, religiously inspired and obsessively neoliberal system. It is based on a cleverly crafted hegemonic apparatus. This has been quite evident

<sup>6</sup> What has impressed many analysts over the past 10 years is the broad nature of Turkey’s economic development. The industrial and services sectors has expanded alongside tourism.

since 2011, with violent repression of public protests, the jailing of journalists on suspicion of conspiring with terrorists, the pressure being put upon newspaper owners to sack critical journalists; and the updating of the 1980s' military regime's anti-terrorism laws (GOKAY, 2012).

All the above mentioned developments are symptomatic of an administration that has spent too long in power and become too confident about its capacity to maintain electoral power. Therefore, perhaps the recent conflict in Turkey between the Government and its people – which found its most powerful expression in the Taksim Gezi Park protest – boils down more than anything else to a style of ruling and in particular to the style of a leader who is increasingly intolerant of dissent. As his regime provides material improvement in the lives of large sections of Turkey's population, so his leadership becomes more confidently autocratic. This confidence is based on electoral success with almost 53 per cent of Turks voting for him in the 2011 election. While Erdogan and the AKP may be showing signs of becoming increasingly undemocratic, *this does not justify the categorisation of the events in Turkey as part of an 'Arab Spring'*. Despite the obvious 'Tahrir feel' of Taksim, we argue that there are a number of substantial differences between the Taksim protests in 2013 and the Arab Spring events. To begin with, Egypt's Mubarak was a dictator, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is an elected prime minister. More importantly, the Arab uprisings were mass events preceded by massive economic crises, while the protest movement in Turkey is a mainly middle-class movement, with mostly young educated people defending lifestyle matters. The Turkish protestors were, in general, educated professionals and university students many from reasonably well-off families and good job prospects. And they were well connected through technology. This suggests the new middle class of an emerging powerhouse. They protested about their quality of life, about future opportunities, and freedom of expression (TURKISH PROTESTERS ARE YOUNG..., 2013).

The mainstream terminology used by the Western media and experts, and shared by some Left/ Liberal accounts, both in Turkey and abroad, made comparisons between Taksim and Tahrir Square referring to the ability of the street to topple a government. Some even claimed that "the Gezi Park resistance is a [revolutionary] turning point for the people of Turkey. After many decades they feel their power again" (ALMAN, 2013). However tempting, we believe such comparisons represent a gross over-simplification based on a range of superficial similarities many of which ignore the class analysis of the events. The



political-economic roots of the events in Turkey are also very different from those of its war-torn Arab neighbours, that is, the majority of Turkish protesters hold professional jobs or are university students with reasonably good job prospects as opposed rather than being unemployed and economically desperate as many of the young people who took the Arab streets were.

Turkey's protests also need to be distinguished from the discontent expressed in some of its European neighbours, such as Greece and Spain where weak economies brought unemployed youth out onto the streets. The riot police in Turkey employed considerable force against the Taksim-Gezi protestors, not unlike Spanish, Italian, Greek, and British police tactics that were witnessed during the same months when hundreds of thousands of protestors walked against their crisis-ridden governments' austerity policies. In those European countries comparable levels of police force were employed, with the same instruments – tear gas, water cannons and plastic bullets – to pacify the protesters and control the angry crowd. However, interestingly, none of these European events were considered as a British, Greek or Spanish 'Spring'!

Undoubtedly, the two events, Turkey's and Egypt's, started and centred in two symbolic squares- Tahrir and Taksim; just like Tahrir Square Taksim has become a strong reminder of the power of public space; a number of normally rigorously competing football fans unified in their opposition to their governments' policies leaving aside their historical differences to defend 'their city'; protesters demanded the resignation of the rulers in both cases; and the police responded harshly both in Tahrir and Taksim squares (IN ISTANBUL'S HEART..., 2013).<sup>7</sup> But the similarities end here. Still, some articles in the mainstream media focused mainly on the Turkish government's Islamism and the presence of secular groups within the demonstrations, presenting Turkey's protests as yet another example of an Oriental Muslim dictator oppressing his mostly secular subjects. These interpretations tend to simplify complex and multi-layered events into gratifying morality tales about Western democratic secularists versus conservative Islamist (SCALEA, 2013). They are also ethnocentric, presenting Muslims only in clichés and run the risk of creating a cultural caricature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A poll published in the *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2013, revealed that 70 percent of the protesters insisted they did not 'feel close' to any political party.

<sup>8</sup> Such Eurocentric prejudices had emerged over centuries, supported by the writings of leading Western thinkers/ writers. Immanuel Kant, for instance, divided humans into four racial categories, set apart from each other by differences in natural disposition. "Humanity", he writes, is "at its

## Brazil, Turkey (and Chile) – Protests Follow Economic Success

It would be more appropriate to make comparisons between the demonstrations in Turkey and the protests in Brazil, which started just a couple of weeks after the protests in Taksim. The Brazilian urban unrest began in early June 2013 against a proposed 7 per cent rise in public transport fares but spiralled into a host of other concerns about public services more generally. The protestors were also demonstrating against the stadium-building for the 2014 World Cup on grounds of displacement and waste of public resources.

One might even include the student protests in Chile in 2011 here.<sup>9</sup> Despite their significant differences, in particular in terms of the reactions from the Turkish and Brazilian authorities, both Turkish and Brazilian protesters seemed to be coming from similar class backgrounds and ages, and they were making similar demands of democracy in similarly innovative ways. One placard in Sao Paulo read “Peace is over, Turkey is here” (*RT*, 15 June 2013; *Business Insider*, 14 June 2013). The political economic conditions in both countries present a similar picture: As Castells notes, both Brazil and Turkey are among the group of Emerging Powers with no economic crisis. In both, but Brazil particularly, there were strong anti-poverty programmes by the state led by popular parties. In Brazil, a popular Left party is in political power, and in Turkey a populist centre-right party, inspired by liberal Islamic values, is in the driving seat (CASTELLS, 2014).

There are a number of other comparisons that one would make of Turkey and Brazil, (and Chile too): both are dynamic regional powers with booming economies and popular, democratically elected governments; both countries are exerting increasingly considerable and independent influence in the regional and global affairs, and often being

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greatest perfection in the race of the whites”. (EZE, 1997, p.47, 55 and 63) Similarly, James Mill, great British philosopher and historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a five-volume history of India to demonstrate how deficient the Indians are in governance, science, philosophy, art, and technology. Today other Western writers repeat a similar line. Niall Ferguson, for instance, asserts that without the spread of British rule, colonised people, such as Chinese and Indians, would not have parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, incorrupt government, and individual freedoms. (FERGUSON, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Massive protests of August 2011 or the Chilean Education Conflict (as labelled in Chilean media), a series of ongoing student-led protests across Chile, demanding a new framework for education in the country. Beyond the specific demands regarding education, there is a feeling that the protests reflect a ‘deep discontent’ among some parts of society with Chile’s high level of inequality. Recently, following the start of the protest movement in Brazil, mostly peaceful demonstrations started again across the country to demand education reform.

cited as models of economic growth; both have been developing global ambitions. Brazil is the B of the BRICS and the largest economy in the Western hemisphere after the US. Turkey is at a critical junction of Europe and the Middle East, and is a key geopolitical player in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Middle East.

There are, of course, some divergences too. The immediate, explicit issues which led to the protests are not exactly the same, but similarly urban: the government's plan to redevelop Gezi Park, an urban park next to Istanbul's Taksim Square in Turkish case, it was very much 'a right to the city' type of a movement; an increase in public transport fares in Sao Paulo in Brazilian case for free bus fares and under the slogan "Copa pra quem?" (Whose Cup?) tens of thousands of young Brazilians took to the streets, occupied and set-up neighborhood assemblies to reclaim their city from neoliberal forces. The governments are not at all alike, Turkey having a long-serving popular leader who heads a conservative Islamist party; and Brazil with a relatively new president, Dilma Rousseff, a former leftist guerrilla who was imprisoned and tortured in the 1970s during military dictatorship, heading a leftist popular movement. But there is a very important similarity: they are both representative democracies. Not only that, each country has a powerful military that had been involved in politics in the not too distant past. But now, both countries have managed to put their armies in the barracks, and therefore their democracies are considered quite stable. Based on their economic progress in the recent past, investment in health, education and other public services, reasonably widespread development of their citizens living standards, and reasonably stable democratic process, both countries are often cited as examples of previously underdeveloped countries able to overcome their troubled political past. In this sense, there is no Turkey Spring as there is no Brazilian Spring.<sup>10</sup> This is not Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. Democratically elected governments in Turkey and in Brazil are far more resilient and their leaders far more popular and secure in their power than the North African dictators swept away by the events of 2011. Despite his increasingly authoritarian policies, Turkey's Erdogan still remains immensely popular among the country's poor and deeply religious majority.

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that just before the bus hike fees, and important student demonstration was held in the southern city of Porto Alegre, around the Old Gas Station, against the destruction of a local park for the construction of a Mall. This was coordinated by the same students groups that would organize for the later protests (though not the same people)

However, as can be seen in many ‘democratic’ countries, democratically elected leaders often come to have an inflated sense of knowing better than their citizens what is best for their citizens, and they have a tendency to favour prestigious infrastructure projects over what affects most peoples’ daily lives. This is exactly what is at stake both in Turkey and Brazil. So, in one sense, both in Brazil and Turkey, participatory democracy was forcefully diluted among an orgy of neoliberal mega-projects, generating dubious profits for a small elite in their respective countries. In the Turkish case, it is the ruling AKP’s collusion with powerful business interests in the so-called re-development of Istanbul. In the Brazilian case, it revolves around the use of massive public funds for the ‘for-profit’ hosting of the World Cup and the Olympics.<sup>11</sup> This is common feature of contemporary capitalist system in the context of so-called urban re-development and cultural investment in and around many modern metropolitan centres. This is justified by an economic argument around the importance to capitalism of land, rent and speculation more so than straightforward production. As Harvey notes, “[o]ver the past 30-40 years, where cities try to brand themselves and sell a piece of their history. What is the image of a city? Is it attractive to tourists? Is it trendy? So a city will market itself” (INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HARVEY: REBEL CITIES & URBAN RESISTANCE PART II, 2013). There are many passages describing this situation in David Harvey’s *Rebel Cities*, such as:

Much of the corruption that attaches to urban politics relates to how public investments are allocated to produce something that looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners. The distinction between urban public goods and urban commons is both fluid and dangerously porous. How often are development projects subsidized by the state in the name of the common interest when the true beneficiaries are a few landholders, financiers, and developers? (HARVEY, 2012, p. 78).

The events in Turkey and Brazil in 2013 illustrate to how the authorities responded to the crowd when their ‘grand’ projects of neoliberal restructuring were challenged by their citizens, many

<sup>11</sup> There is a background to this: since 2008, the ongoing pacification programmes in Rio’s favelas which entail a neoliberal urbanized approach to social and class warfare through the application of a range of different public policies to “troubled” neighbourhoods, such as special police units (Pacification Police Units, UPP) patrolling favelas to help broker peace being warring drug traffickers.

of whom may have voted for the ruling parties. No representative democracy is fully democratic, but neither are the Turkish, Brazilian and Chilean rulers' unique in not fully representing the demands of their populations. In the UK, which is often considered one of the best examples of Western parliamentary democracy, just over ten years ago in February - March 2003, Tony Blair's Labour government utterly ignored huge demonstrations against the prospect of war in Iraq. These were the largest demonstrations ever in the history of his country, including the two-million strong anti-war protest that took place in London in February 2003. However, Blair and his government pressed on with a disastrous war policy against Iraq. The surveys of that time (March 2003) pointed out that fifty-five per cent of Britons agreed that the London marchers were right because the war was delivered on false pretences and delivered little other than bloodshed. There were also global protests against the war in Iraq: three million people protested on the streets of Rome, in what was considered to be the largest anti-war rally ever in human history, and anywhere between 10 and 30 million people in other metropolises around the world participated in similar protests. Still, none of this made any serious impact on the decisions of the Blair government regarding starting a war in Iraq. The Western governments' refusal to listen to the anti-war protesters was such a dramatic illustration of the limits of parliamentary democracy, but also such events shaped a strong and growing taste for direct action, one can find many examples from the anti-Vietnam War actions in the 1970s to the occupy movements of the 2008-13.<sup>12</sup>

Until recently, Turkey, Chile and Brazil were the envy of much of the world. With their spectacular economic rise since the late 1990s these were among the fastest developing countries on earth. All three countries have seen a strong period of mass growth, economically and population-wise. While the structural inequalities and long standing corruption culture did not disappear, sustained growth brought in enough tax revenues to improve both education and health spending in Brazil and Turkey. The boom also allowed the governments to create jobs for the massively young population and increase minimum wages

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<sup>12</sup> Guardian/ICM poll, in February 2003, shows that at least one person from 1.25 million households in Britain went on Saturday's anti-war march in London, confirming estimates that between one million and two million people went on the march. The poll shows it is the prime minister's personal standing rather than the Labour party which has suffered the wrath of anti-war voters. Labour's standing is down four points from 43% last month to 39% this month but the government still maintains a healthy eight-point lead over the Conservatives. See TRAVIS, A; BLACK, I. Blair's popularity plummets. *The Guardian*, 18 February 2003.

significantly without any apparent damage to employment. As a result of governments' extension of welfare, health and educational provision, a large section of people in Turkey, and Brazil, has gained access to better public services.<sup>13</sup>

If we try to make a connection between these economic success stories and the recent protest movements, the first observation would be about how a strong cycle of economic enrichment over the past ten years has changed the public's expectations of its politicians. Since Turkish, Chilean and Brazilian regimes achieved sustained growth and employment, delivering on growth and employment is no longer enough to satisfy the majority of their populations. Citizens increasingly hold their leaders accountable to improve the quality of public services, and to expand the boundaries of participatory democracy, and listen to their concerns closely. One therefore can consider the protests in Chile, Turkey and Brazil as a symptom of radically shifting demands, driven mostly by these emerging power houses' economic success in the last decade. These are democratic protest movements in societies experiencing rapid social change where the public's demand for better services and more democracy at local as well as national levels grow at a faster pace than their governments' ability to provide.

Despite the multiplication of the slogans and emerging chaos about the aims of the protesters, it is important to note that the protest of both Turkey's and Brazil's urban youth are first and foremost a response to the ruling regimes' grandiose neoliberal projects of urban transformation,<sup>14</sup> their gentrifying schemes, with the aim of creating high-tech malls, skyscrapers, and expensive giant high-tec stadiums. All this is part of "the violent neoliberal attack upon the public provision of social public goods over the last thirty years or more" (HARVEY, 2012, p. 85).

It is also important to take note of the educated urban youth that is at the forefront of the resistance to such neoliberal assault. To many analysts, young people's role in the protest movements came as a surprise because young people had been identified as apolitical and individualistic for decades. With the recent protest movements in the summer of 2013, urban youth proved that they cared about how the current policies of their governments are affecting their life, their urban

<sup>13</sup> SUROWIECKI, James. 'Middle Class Militants'. *The New Yorker*, 8 July 2013; BOTT, Uwe. 'Brazil and Turkey: The Global Middle Class Rises', *The Globalist*. June 21, 2013

<sup>14</sup> Although it should be noted that, in the case of Brazil, many urban project developed during the spike of Brazilian economy had public money in it, and the Development Bank and Petrobras were central in injecting stimula into the private sector with Public-Private partnerships and public funding programs.

space, their country and their fellow citizens, and that they are willing to protest resiliently.

### **Youth and urban ‘warfare’**

Within neoliberal narratives, youth are mostly defined as a consumer market, a drain on the economy, or stand for trouble. ... Young people increasingly have become subject to an oppressive disciplinary machine that teaches them to define citizenship through the exchange practices of the market and to follow orders and toe the line in the face of oppressive forms of authority. They are caught in a society in which almost every aspect of their lives is shaped by the dual forces of the market and a growing police state. The message is clear: Buy/ sell/ or be punished. (GIROUX, 2013)

These words of pessimism belong to the US social critic Henry Giroux. Much like the protesters in Turkey, demonstrators in Brazil had jobs and were well educated. They were mainly drawn from the country’s growing middle classes, which government figures show has ballooned by some 40 million over the past decade amid a commodities-driven economic boom. Unlike countries such as Greece and Spain where weak economies have brought the unemployed out onto the streets, the real long-term origins of the discontent in Brazil and Turkey has been created by strong economic growth (FAIOLA; MOURA, 2013). As standards of living have risen in general, so have people’s expectations for better services and wider participation in decision-making. Brazilian and Turkish youth were not protesting because they wanted to overthrow a dictator or because they were angry about massive unemployment. They were upset, and rightly so, about the priorities of their governments for their cities and the manner in which these priorities were pursued – without sufficient consultation by their governments. They demanded the right to participate in the planning and distribution of their country’s resources. In both countries, people demanded the right to be heard and to be involved, linked to the feeling that they were not really able to get involved in the decision-making that would alter their conceived urban space, and their day-to-day lives. They wanted the right to determine their own futures. They were no longer prepared to be talked down to by the government (SUROWIECKI, 2013). The protests can in one general sense be read as the articulation by those involved of what a fair and just world might be (SHAKER, 2013). Turkish and Brazilian youth, rejecting the neoliberal notion that democracy and markets are the same,

not only addressed some of the current injustices while reclaiming their urban space, but they also began to produce new ideas with a new and very imaginative political language

In the final analysis, we believe that the protest movements that arose in the urban areas of Turkey and Brazil in 2013, represent these political and social struggles (struggle over the city, and its urbanization), at least the beginning of them. These were the direct responses of youth in search of “a different way of urban living from that which was being imposed upon them by capitalist developers and the state” (SHAKER, 2013, p. 21). In our view, the demonstrations can be connected to a wider discussion, first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1968 (LEFEBVRE, 1996, p. 69-85), and recently developed by David Harvey around ‘the right to the city’ which is a right to democratic control over the process of urbanization. The specific aims of the protesters in Istanbul and São Paulo, to keep a green space as a public park and to defend affordable transportation fees for an urban public, are in a general sense their attempt to reclaim their city, their urban space. Whatever the initial results, or lack of specific gains, of the recent protests, Turkish and Brazilian youth created in 2013, “a critical mass of political energy” for a “struggle to fashion an alternative to globalisation that does not trade on monopoly rents in particular or cave in to multinational capitalism in general”, and initiated “a platform for what an alternative urbanization project might look like” (MAHON, 2012).

## **Where is the movement now?**

At the time of writing, protestors are marking the first anniversary of the Taksim–Gezi protests, with relatively small but well-organized demonstrations. The unrest sparked by the Taksim protests created one of the biggest challenges to Erdogan’s time in office, 12 years with an increasing electoral support. A lot has happened in the twelve months since then, including the mining explosion which occurred in the city of Soma in May 2014 taking the lives of 301 workers. Erdogan’s apparent indifference to the plight of the miners and their families provoked some renewed outrage and a fresh set of disturbances in cities after he publically downplayed the accident. Arriving fresh on the back of a corruption scandal, the mining disaster offered a potential platform for widening the net of the predominantly young, urban and well-educated Gezi movement, but so far these attempts remained relatively low profile comparing with the events of 2013 summer.



Erdogan not only remains in power but his party achieved an overwhelming victory in the local elections in March 2014 furthering Erdogan's chances of running for president in August. And, in fact, his victory in the 2014 Presidential Elections (with 51.8 %, and more than 21 million of voters) did not constitute a surprise (he has now an open field to create a presidentialist regime in the country). Erdogan may have alienated the secular middle class youth by introducing new curbs on the sale of alcohol and Internet use. There has been a clear determination of the use of force to police urban demonstrations but Erdogan still maintains a large following, especially among poorer and more religious voters of the Anatolian towns and the countryside. And the reason for this lies in the significant economic growth that has coincided with the AKP rule in the last 10 years, and the appeal to traditionalist religious values that AKP seems to have secured.

As long as the economy performs reasonably well, it seems the ruling party can manage to secure this strong support and quell the impetus of the Gezi movement. But economic success is not necessarily a guarantee for a stable and democratic progress as the Taksim Gezi protestors highlighted a year ago. Erdogan has successfully chipped away at the security services, the army and the judiciary, and established his overriding authority by crushing democratic protests. But this is all very dangerous for him and his party: all this centralisation of power also means the centralisation of blame – as recently witnessed following the Soma mine disaster.

The Taksim-Gezi protests showed that the relationship between economic and social development of a country and the democratization of its political system is considerably complex. We, however, believe that it would be safe to claim that there is a fragile but essential link between being a strong economic power and establishing a stable democratic system in the long run: One does not survive long without the other. Neither will tend to last long in the conditions of the absence of the other. Today, Turkey is still a rising economic power, with its internationally competitive companies turning the youthful nation into an entrepreneurial hub, tapping cash-rich export markets in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East while attracting significant levels of investment in return. But all this progress will require a stable and functioning democracy to survive. It is not possible for Turkey to be a credible world power without achieving fully functioning democratic status, including freedom of expression and democratic rights. There is no exception to this, all existing evidence from the transition countries

point to this same conclusion. Turkey will become a real global power and a country at peace with the majority of its citizens only when its economic progress is matched by a strong, stable and functioning democratic system.

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