

Biopolitics & the Gezi Protests

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Abstract—Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP, has been using women’s body in implementing social and economic policies since they came into power in 2002. Male rooted political power within the party has been creating regulations concerning sex and reproduction. This paper aims to explain women’s involvement in the Gezi Park as a reaction to political intervention with and endogenous control over women’s bodies.

Keywords-*bodypolitics; Gezi; gender; Foucault; abortion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault claimed that sexuality became a political discourse in the early nineteenth century and during the second half of the century, the politics of life became an integral part of state practices. Through what Foucault called the “biopolitics of the populations”, political systems asserted control over human bodies.¹ Foucault did not mention gender in his writings on the relationship between the individual body and the government, but the conceptual frame of biopolitics he provided influenced feminist scholars like Butler.² According to Foucault, law serves as a normalizing force which is dependent on heterosexuality, reproduction and family structure. As such “the status given to the law is precisely the status given to the phallus, the symbolic place of the father, the indisputable and incontestable.”³ As a result, women’s roles in the state (reproduction and mothering) and their bodies are normalized by biopolitics:

“If we place sexual and reproductive legislation at the center of citizenship formation, and understand political activity as biological passivity - It is the womb that has become the predominant biopolitical space.”⁴

Sexuality has always been an issue for the Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP, which has been using women’s body in implementing social and economic policies since they came into power in 2002. Male rooted political power within the party has been creating regulations concerning sex and reproduction. This paper aims to explain women’s involvement in the Gezi Park protests which started

on May 31, 2013 in Istanbul as a reaction to the AKP’s biopolitics and their use of the women’s bodies for state policies.

II. “ABORTION IS MURDER”

Feminist groups have been reacting to the AKP’s belief that preserving moral and religious values would create a stable and secure Turkey. AKP has been reinforcing marriage, reproductive, motherhood, homemaker, and nurturing functions for women since they started ruling. However, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s closing speech at International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held on May 24-25 in Istanbul carried the conflict to a more intense level. Erdogan - who has been asking for 3-5 children from married couples for the benefit of future generations - declared abortion “murder” and therefore those female citizens (womb owners) who get abortions “murderers.”⁵

Political intervention with and endogenous control over women’s bodies led to a public reaction from feminists who started the “My Body, My Choice” campaign. Minister for Health, Recep Akdag, aggravated the discussion by responding to this campaign by stating “we care about the baby’s rights even when the woman is raped. The state will take care of the child.”⁶

Following abortion, the elective cesarean section was made into a political issue by Erdogan who in May 2012 declared that he was opposed to the procedure because women who had it could not give birth to more than 2 children. He repeated that they needed to have at least three children “for the welfare of the state.”⁷

As the abortion and cesarean section debates raged, on May 27th 2012 Aylin Nazliaka, MP for the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) made the following announcement: “The prime minister should quit playing politics over women’s bodies. To put it in a nutshell, I say the

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, translated by Graham Burchell, edited by Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³ Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 21

⁴ Ruth Miller, *The Limits of Bodily Integrity. Abortion, Adultery, and Rape Legislation in Comparative Perspective*. (Ashgate: Aldershot 2007), 27

⁵ “Erdogan: Kürtaj bir cinayettir”, *Milliyet.com*, last modified May 26 2012, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/erdogan-kurtaj-bir-cinayettir/siyaset/siyasetdetay/26.05.2012/1545254/default.htm>

⁶ “Bakan Akdag: Tecavuz bebegine devlet bakar”, *Radikal.com*, last modified May 31 2012, http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/bakan_akdag_tecavuz_bebegine_devlet_bakar-1089651

⁷ “Erdogan: Kürtaj yasasını çıkartacağız”, *Radikal.com*, last modified May 29 2012, http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/erdogan_kurtaj_yasasini_cikartacagiz-1089484

prime minister should quit standing guard over women's vaginas. This totalitarian regime has brought Turkey to the point of intervening in people's private lives."⁸

In place of Erdogan, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc responded "I am a shy person, I could get bothered when an elegant lady looks at me...I also got extremely embarrassed during the abortion discussions when you, as a married woman with children [my italics, I.E], openly spoke of one of your organs [vagina]."⁹ This was the final blow for many women in Turkey who, on social media started posting pictures of vaginas and tagging Arinc. A few of them took to the streets and marched against AKP's biopolitics and their attempts to regulate the flow of bodies, sexual encounters and sexual expression in Turkey. It was not until the Gezi Park Protests, however, that tens of thousands, from all walks of life, got together to express their discomfort.

III. THE GEZI PROTESTS

I arrived at the park on Wednesday 29th to support a small group of environmentalist and LGBT activist friends in a handful of tents and one sign asking the government not to touch their park, trees, dirt, and seeds. When the police marched into the park with tear gas and water cannons people from all socio-economic backgrounds came in support of the protestors. The numbers of the protestors and signs multiplied every day. A young lecturer in a red dress, carrying a small shoulder bag, being tear-gassed by the police became the iconic image of the heavy-handed police involvement and AKP as an authoritarian father trying to tame its children.

Motherhood was one of the most frequently mentioned discourses at the park. The socialist, feminist collective hang up a giant sign at the entrance of the park reading "we don't owe children to men and to the state". The AKP government was heavily criticized for its interference with private lives and choices of woman. The protesters chanted whether Erdogan would like three children like them.

When the governor of Istanbul tried to appeal to mothers' protectiveness towards their children and asked them to call their children from the "unsafe" park, a large group of mothers arrived, not to take their children home but to protest with them. They were trying to challenge the traditional roles attributed to them and also disobey the state, by rejecting its assumed role of the authoritarian father. LISTAG, the organization of parents of the LGBT children, were also ever-present at the park promoting their documentary "My Child"¹⁰ but also rejecting the roles assigned to them by the AKP, raising "normal" and "healthy"¹¹ children.

Although body politics were heavily criticized at the park during the early days, the most frequently chanted slogan was

"Erdogan, Son of a Whore". Feminists reacted by hanging signs condemning the use of sexist and homophobic slogans and asking the protestors to show respect for the prostitutes chapulling¹² shoulder to shoulder with them. Sex workers joined the protests holding signs which read "We, the prostitutes, are a hundred percent certain these politicians are not our children". They were trying to undermine the sexist assumption underlying the mentality against the profession and but also challenging AKP's moralism by implying that what they do for a living is much more dignified than what the politicians do. The strong presence and loud voice of these women's groups at the protests contributed to the reduction of sexist and homophobic discourse at the park.

Nevertheless, the bodies of women became totems of the protests. Photographs of the iconic women in red dress, and of other young women standing in front of a water cannons were widely shared both on mainstream and social media. Resisting women were named 'Miss Turkey 2013', and the "most beautiful" among all. The pictures of women who do not fit the type, i.e., female protestors with hairdos and high heels who are expected to be apolitical and women with headscarves who are expected to be bowing to Erdogan's authority, were among the most frequently shared images.

Gezi protests did not put an end to institutionalized sexism in Turkey nor did it completely transform a sexist and homophobic culture but it definitely was the largest civil disobedience we have witnessed in our lifetimes. Women from all walks of life raised their voices against the roles the government has assigned to them and rejected the state's involvement with their bodies. As a participant observer at the Gezi Protests and a proud chapulcu I do believe that it will have a long lasting effect on how politics is done in Turkey and challenge the authority of the phallus, the male rooted political power.

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⁹ "Arinc'tan Vajina Monologları", Bianet, last modified December 12 2012, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/142743-arinc-tan-vajina-monologlari>

¹⁰ *Benim Cocugum*, directed by Can Candan (Turkiye: Surela Film) 2013.

¹¹ On several occasions the members of AKP have rejected homosexuality as a disease, a biological disorder that needs to be treated.

¹² A neologism coined from Erdogan's use of the term *capulcu* ("looters") to describe the protestors at Gezi Park. *Capulcu* was rapidly reappropriated by the protestors, both in its original form and as the anglicized *chapuller* and additionally verified *chapulling*, given the meaning of "fighting for your rights". "demanding justice". "Chapulling", Wikipedia. Accessed on July 27 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapulling>

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