

Reclaiming the Public Sphere in Turkey: Arendtian and Habermasian Interpretation of Forums

The summer of 2013 was beset by endemic protests in democracies where dissatisfaction with the status quo of politics was the defining feature. The streets of Brazil, Bulgaria and Turkey, though differed in their primary concerns, hosted floods of crowds expressing grievances. The streets were chosen as the space — not local assemblies, coffee shops or houses. The immense space provided by streets for holding vast groups of people, and the possibility of appearing together have been the appeal of streets. Being out, appearing in the ‘public sphere’ for which streets were initially chosen as a stage, empowered people. In Turkey, the movements took another turn and public forums emerged. will first probe in the evolution of the movement into the public forums in Turkey then analyze the potential of forums by portraying them through the lens of Arendtian and Habermasian approaches, and finally share my insight about expanding the forums.

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Published on October 7, 2013

Journal: Research Turkey

The Journey from Gezi Park to Forums

The anti-government upheaval in Turkey spurred by Gezi Park protests, embodied various resistance movements and also incorporated them into the literature of Turkish political protests. The first phase of the movement encompassed large-scale street demonstrations. As we were witnessing the end of first phase as a result of relentless government crackdown, the second phase has begun. Notably very reminiscent of Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy of passive resistance, the second phase has harbored a myriad of forms ranging from the ultra-pacifist standing men, commemorating the victims of the movement, to calls for cutting transactions with brands or malls that are known to be pro-government. These aberrations from the ultra-obedience or utter-passivism, were noted as important signals for a changing society. Yet, the real power and potential of second phase to undertake a transformation, I believe, comes from the open public forums. They will likely be the key to entering the third phase where public discussions and deliberative educative mechanisms will be at work nationwide, provided the political astuteness and tenacity observed in the participants of the movements so far remain in place.

Forums, mushrooming mostly in Istanbul and Ankara but also spread to other cities such as Eskişehir, İzmir, Hatay and even beyond the borders (London, Boston, Los Angeles), are simply gatherings for open and independent public debates about current or past political matters centered around the idea of expressing dissatisfactions and proposing alternative solutions to political issues. They gather at a certain time in the evening on a specified day or days in a neighborhood park – symbolic of Gezi Park and also a convenient space for public discussion[1]. They are based on the principle of free and equal participation and absence of hierarchy. They are, thus, de facto welcoming to everyone and are embracing differences; no discrimination is permitted especially regarding political beliefs or ethnicity. The forums function with very basic regulatory rules such as raising hands to speak or not interrupting a speaker. Except for such procedural regulations, there is almost no restriction. They discuss and deliberate on issues from peace process, women rights, electoral process to Syrian policy or tax reform.

Arendtian Interpretation of Forums: Action and Freedom

Forums are extensions of the demonstrations in the first phase in terms of accentuating the 'action' component of human condition in Arendtian terms, which consists of 'labor, work and action'. The human condition of action is a space of appearance enabling self-revelation through speech, posits Arendt. It

entails pure and unconditional equality, plurality and utmost freedom. It is the ability to speak in the world of equals that distinguishes human beings; it is the words and deeds that render a human being an individual. More strikingly, she suggests that to be alive as a human being, as opposed to being a mere body, is to act and speak with others in the public sphere. Action is the most important condition of 'human life', according to Arendt.

The demonstrations as well as forums, then, have been the enactment of the action component in Arendtian approach to human condition. The demonstrations very much required physical participation, i.e. being out on the streets and bringing your body along with your mind. When asked about why they are out, people told the reporters that they are out because all other channels of making themselves heard were blocked and because all efforts to reach the government were of little availability, there was no other way left but being present in person out on the streets; by doing so only can they exhibit their existence, make themselves visible and voice their opinions. Many people confessed in interviews that before these protests erupted they would have never imagined sleeping in a park, or thought that they could speak in front of hundreds expressing their thoughts. The people are now breaking their shells and inserting themselves into the 'world of appearances' as a last resort to oppose the rule of Erdoğan and maybe as the first step towards a new democratic political culture.

Kindred to the demonstrations, in forums, people by being present with their bodies, minds and souls and by participating in forums, expressing opinions and engaging in debate, are simply fulfilling their capacity of action, according to Arendt. They speak, and through their 'words and deeds', they create themselves, which is the only way to be a complete human being in Arendtian formulation. Thus, forums empower people, make them full individuals, and enable them to feel part of the social environment they live in.

Demand for more freedom was a central issue in the movements; when dismissed by the ruler, people consulted other means to bring back their freedoms. According to Arendt, freedom is enacted when people participate, speak and appear with other people. The positive freedoms of speech, of assembly, of choice and of thought were, thus, claimed by realizing the Arendtian freedom. They are now reclaiming their freedoms by making themselves appear within the public sphere. Arendt also suggests that 'if people wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce' (Arendt, 1961, p.165). In line with this thought, in the forums, the sovereign is the public as a whole. Some voluntary leaders emerge to help organize or canalize thoughts,

yet discussions are collaborative. The overarching goal of the forums is to enable everyone present to participate without any restraints but time. They manifest and reclaim their freedom through communication and interaction with other people, just like Arendt proposed. By expressing their ideas, predispositions and complaints, people recreate their identity, perform action and become free.

Habermasian Interpretation: Forums as Public Sphere

Public sphere as the most fundamental arena — currently the only arena in Turkey — for the reclamation of freedom is of paramount importance and with its current function it instantiates Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. As conceptualized by Habermas, the 'public sphere' is 'a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed...and in which citizens can confer in an unrestrictive manner — that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions — about matters of general interest' (Habermas, 1964, p.49-53). In this political public sphere [2], notes Habermas, access is guaranteed to all citizens. Nevertheless, these citizens have to distance themselves from their particular status, own value positions and convictions and entertain themselves from the perspective of others so that the deliberation will take place amongst peers regardless of unequal status. Here lies one of the most salient distinctions between public and private sphere: there will not be any talk pertinent to private matters because the aim of this public body is discussing their common interest; merely private interests are inadmissible. Furthermore, the equality is assured by undressing people of their social identities and classes; they participate as private and completely equal individuals sharing a common interest.

The public sphere presupposes freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press and the right to participate in political debate and deliberation (Habermas, 1964). The result of such deliberation will give birth to 'public opinion' about matters that are common to all (Fraser, 1992). Moreover, it is vital that this deliberation is in the form of rational-critical debate, which is indeed the lifeblood of the public sphere. The use of reason in a free manner in a public sphere by the public against a public authority is very crucial for the outcome to be assigned the title of 'public'.

The demarcation between the private and public sphere is of essence for proper definition of public sphere. Private sphere refers to the realm where maintenance of the domestic life for one's own interest is the heart of the

matter. Public sphere is free from individual interests as well as state authority and markets; what distinguishes public sphere is its supreme and mere focus on issues that are to the interest of all yet, 'issues that are to the interest of all' is inherently fluid, and subject to change. Feminist discourses such as 'personal is political' moved the domestic realm from being pertinent purely to private to a major part of public sphere. Now, government intrusion in the private realm is a matter for public discourse because certain elements in the private realm is no longer solely private Thus public sphere may host a wide variety of issues that are to the common interest.

In the context of Turkey, the long-lasting exemplary struggle of the Bergama movement being the leading example, there have been some instances of public sphere especially in grassroots environmental movements; yet, it was never pervasive enough to be a principal part of political culture. Discussing public matters with utmost inclusivity and no intervention of personal interest are not very familiar phenomena in the Turkish political culture. The historically entrenched culture of obedience that has been further forced by the milieu of fear rather than a culture which fosters rational-critical debate, have been dominant in Turkey. Yet, the Gezi movement, with all its elements of resistance, brought new dynamics into the public participation in politics and construction of the public sphere.

Interestingly the reconstruction of public sphere in Turkey and the degeneration of public sphere as depicted by Habermas carry very similar triggering elements. The rise of state capitalism and the rising influence of economic corporations over the media and the state, according to Habermas, posed a threat to the public sphere since these blurred the line between the public and private sphere. We can observe these reasons as some of the stimulating factors behind the movement; hence, the factors contributing to the demise of the original public sphere as in Habermasian formulation are similar to some of the grievances of the protesters and the forum debates, which prepared the grounds for the rise of public sphere in Turkey.

The effort to recreate the public sphere and utilize it as a medium to bring together anti-government people is only complete with the transmission of the forum decisions and discussions to the public at large. The press looms large in the conveyance of the messages. In Habermasian formulation, critical journals are vital; they carry the political messages of the public sphere conversations. Actually, the press in eighteenth century England acted as a channel for public opinion as well as a way of forming opinion. The public opinion had even the chance to enter into the parliament and debated in their agenda thanks to the

media. As the public became more powerful and important with an increasing stress on democracy as a result of enlightened views in nineteenth century, parliamentary parties actively began to appeal to the public. Hence, the media served as a medium between public and political sphere.

In Turkey, the mainstream media is currently owned by major holdings and they are under the mandate of the government due to their strong economic ties to Erdoğan and/or due to the fear of being targeted by enraged Erdoğan, as exemplified by his attack on Koç Holding who supported the movement. The ensuing auto-censorship hampers independent or critical journalism. However, the forums have access to burgeoning independent media outlets including TV's, journals, blogs and newspapers. Thus, their decisions will be publicly available. One of the most common agenda items across different forums is how to communicate with the dissident groups such as AKP voters in the vicinity and with the far rest of the country where press is requisite. Mobilizing the press, their networks and every possible media outlet, they are determined to achieve the goal of communication, and make themselves heard and accurately understood.

On Expanding the Forums

In most of the forums, they seem to expend an extra effort to embrace any dissident group even when they are associated with pro-government or counter-movement speeches or acts. One thing that came up in every forum is emphasis on inclusion; jeering, ridiculing or belittling opposing views on the grounds of their lower education or blind obedience is not tolerated. Any pernicious idea such as ethnic nationalism that may jeopardize the unifying aspect of the forums is rejected outright in many forums. Nonetheless, the association of forums with Kemalist and nationalist groups is still palpable in some of them yet even so democratic milieu is dominant so it does not create much disturbance, they are still overall very embracing in accordance with Arendtian principle of plurality and Habermasian principle of general access.

These are very conscious and admirable efforts; however, they are fronting with a prime-minister who strongly holds on to polarization discourses. The true meaning and intention of the movement are not grasped well across different sections of the population due to the denigrating efforts by the government and government's unrivalled influence over its supporters. Forums, as the second stage of the movement, have the power to override these malicious efforts by the government. They by wielding public power, and

utilizing the transforming force of the public sphere, may completely alter the image of the movement in the minds of pro-AKP circles.

One issue hanging loosely in this delineation of forums as public sphere is the bourgeois aspect of it. The participants consist overwhelmingly of highly educated, middle class, anti-capitalist groups. Even though they are, in principle, open to everyone, their accessibility is questionable. They may be intimidating for people from lower classes, or uneducated section of the society. Also, they are not spread out or proximate enough to intrigue pro-government groups and embolden them to visit as they pass. Since these forums are already stigmatized as the 'revolutionary forces' or anti-Erdoğan group, they are not going to attract much attention from the pro-AKP group yet. In Yeniköy, an incident had already transpired where the pro-government groups viciously attacked the forum participants and blatantly expressed their reluctance to have them in their district.

Furthermore, they are far from institutionalized and are facing a lot of challenges since they are nascent. First of all, their publicity is limited and they are heavily concentrated in certain major locations. Spatial concentration is not necessarily a problem if they gain enough publicity; however as it is, they cannot access other cities or regions, or garner sufficient interest from them, which goes against one of their primary roles as I see it i.e. to move the movement to a national scale. As much as I watch from the live stream and read from the 'parklarbizim' blogspot, there are also coordination and moderation problems both within and across forums. The lack of leadership is yet another crucial issue, but the very core idea of forums is to dismiss any sovereignty and have the public assume bigger roles. Thus, it is a conundrum in and of itself since the idea of being run by another entity/person/group will not be welcomed.

The good news is that they are actually aware of their problems, and there are already attempts to develop solutions. For example, there are self-assigned groups to facilitate communication across forums. They are already holding cross-forum meetings to precipitate interaction and ensure better coordination. In the end, they are all there for the same goal even though the scope of the goal is wide-ranging. I believe some of these problems are destined to disappear with time and experience. Yet, some problems may remain such as leadership and representation, which are topics of discussion for another article. Notwithstanding these problems, forums are immensely crucial initiatives for experiencing a better democracy in Turkey.

The length and perseverance of the movement has claimed an indelible part in the popular memory. Forums, as the current stage, have a huge potential to be the means to sustain the movement. If they take up, there is no doubt that they will bolster the stamina of the public and will propagate the views of the protesters. Empowered public, in turn, will change the interpretation and exercise of democracy from a minimalist understanding to a maximalist one, highlighting the liberal aspect and participatory dimension of democracy. In the end, as corollary of these struggles, the government will be dragged, without choice, into confrontation with a significant portion of its public. Hence, the forums may provide a promising solution for the people striving to reach a higher democracy and may even elicit alternative leaders. I think that the future of the movement is, largely, in the hands of the forums; transition to a third phase will be possible if forums maintain their existence with a reasonable amount of participation till the next election. The endorsement they receive from the Arendtian and Habermasian theories on democracy, freedom and power also boosts the likelihood of their success.

[1] ‘Parklarbizim’ blog page is one of the largest means to access information about forums. I received most of the information from this webpage. <http://www.parklarbizim.blogspot.ca/>

[2] The literary public sphere precedes the political one, but his description of the political is what fits the current circumstance of forums in Turkey.

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Please cite this publication as follows:

Yaylacı, Şule (October, 2013), “Reclaiming the Public Sphere in Turkey: Arendtian and Habermasian Interpretation of Forums”, Vol. II, Issue 8, pp.11-18, *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (ResearchTurkey)*, London, Research Turkey. (<http://researchturkey.org/?p=4214>)

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