



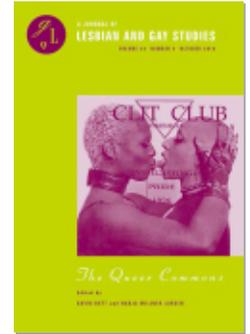
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QUEERING COMMONS IN TURKEY

Cenk Özbay and Evren Saveri

If commons refer to spaces, knowledges, organizations, and services that are owned, controlled, and used publicly for the well-being and survival of all (Akbulut, Adaman, and Kocagöz 2017; Walljasper 2010), what might it mean to queer commons? We investigate queer commons as an emergent form in Turkey through the unfolding of the Gezi Park uprisings in the summer of 2013, which we argue help us think queer through commons, and think commons through queer. This investigation of queer commons as an “emergent” form might at first seem to historically erase older forms of what one might think of as queer commons in Turkey, such as certain bathhouses, parks, and fairly cheap adult movie theaters. While these spaces, along with numerous social services, have been disappearing under neoliberal assaults since the early 2000s (Özbay et al. 2016) and forms of sociability, including queer ones, have been increasingly privatized, we caution against a nostalgic romanticization of a preneoliberal, “old commons” for two reasons.¹ For one, while bathhouses and adult movie theaters have provided spaces for cross-class sexual contact, since they were open to all who could pay the very low admission fee, their operations have been nevertheless private and for-profit. Thus, it is impossible to argue that they have been accessible to the truly poor or the homeless. Further, most spaces one might consider “queer commons” in Turkey, such as the ones listed above, have historically been limited to masculine subjects.² If one of the important interventions of queer has been exposing and rejecting the gay

male-centrism of “LGBT studies,” then this project also requires we be attuned to which sexual subjects some of these old forms of commons were available to. The most recent public revolt against the neoliberal privatization of public spaces in Turkey featured all genders in the fight for a commons, from the perspective of both queer *and* feminist claims to public space.

The Gezi Park uprisings of June 2013 constituted the largest and most public performance of commons in the history of the country. People collectively organized to reclaim, repurpose, and reimagine the park’s space as a venue that belonged to and was used by everyone who spent time there, engaging with each other outside capitalist, commercial, or state-led governance. This setting attracted many queers because of the park’s history as part of the sexual commons of Istanbul. Starting from the late 1970s, Gezi Park has served as a cruising place for men and trans people and has been symbolically inscribed as a space for clandestine queer sexual encounters, commercial or otherwise (Özbay 2017). This historical significance mobilized many queer people to hold on to the “publicness” of the park in the face of the government’s plans to demolish and replace it with a shopping mall built within restored Ottoman barracks. Istanbul residents occupied the park in order to resist its destruction by the government. The occupation lasted for days and publicly positioned queers as active urban citizens who fought against authoritarian oppression and violence alongside straight and cisgender compatriots.

During the resistance, other constituencies also made claims to Gezi. Armenian citizens pointed to the fact that those Ottoman barracks at the center of the conflict had originally been erected on the same land as an Armenian cemetery that was demolished in the process. The democratic space of the Gezi commons made room for various groups to make gendered, sexual, racial, and classed claims to a public space that nevertheless featured uneven histories of dispossession. In other words, the public assembly required to claim a commons also worked to intervene in the erasures that neoliberalism performs on collective memories of public space (Hong 2015).

As Gezi Park transformed into a commons under civilian occupation, queers and feminists organized to provide food and medical supplies, and to share in the cleaning of the park. In addition to their visible copresence, participants held workshops on how to avoid sexist and homophobic language.

Various goods and services, including food and water, medical supplies, books (via “Gezi library”), camping, concerts, and performances, remained free throughout the occupation. No monetary exchanges were permitted. This symbolic and exemplary case of “decommodified” communality (Esping-Andersen 1990;



Figure 1. A poster for the Twenty-First LGBT Pride Parade, 2013

Gibson-Graham [1996] 2006) triggered further questions about the lives made possible in the neoliberal city. It paved the way for money-free barter organizations and events, communal farming and guerrilla gardening, and cooperatives that linked the urbanites with “organic” farmers with no or minimum profit range in different places of Istanbul. Queers have taken an active role in all these forms of commoning since 2013.

Yet it was not simply the public participation of queer bodies in Gezi that queered this commons but also the collective rejection by those who constitute the “majority” of the respectability politics of the government (Savcı 2013, forthcoming). As the revolts and resistance continued, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rhetoric increasingly positioned the protestors as a handful of “plunderers.” Among other allegations, Erdoğan made the false claim that the protestors had entered a mosque with their shoes on to drink beer inside and assault his “sisters” with headscarves.³ The protestors intervened in this rhetoric, refusing the divide between respectable pious (Sunni) Muslims and a “handful of drunkard



Figure 2. Photo from the LGBT Pride Parade, Taksim Square, 2013

plunderers.” They demonstrated their solidarity with Muslim groups at the park by enacting the collective decision to refrain from alcohol consumption on the holy religious day Isra and Mi’raj (*Kandil Bayramı*). But they also refused to make rhetorical claims to respectability and instead identified themselves as “plunderers” and “drunkards” in slogans, banners, chants, and songs throughout the resistance. In addition to T-shirts and signs that simply read *çapulcu* (plunderer), a frequent slogan on banners declared “Neither am I left-wing, nor am I right, I am *çapulcu*, I am *çapulcu*.” With this slogan, protestors distanced themselves from politics as usual and instead embraced the political potential of the disreputable subjectivity of the plunderer.

Gezi Park uprisings were certainly not the only performance of queer commons in Turkey, but they provide a promising model for how various bodies and sexual subjectivities can come together to resist the privatization of public goods as well as respectability politics that neoliberal governments impose on citizen subjects. For instance, in addition to the communal farming and guerrilla gardening practices we mentioned above, another exciting example of the Gezi-inspired commons has been the emergence of meetings and “health forums.” Since 2013, queer and nonqueer volunteers, as well as doctors and medical professionals, have established these forums to discuss specific health-related issues of LGBT individuals and support the HIV-positive and AIDS patients. The “commons” performed

within these health forums and networks have inspired various Istanbul municipalities to launch specific clinics and collaborate with NGOs in order to provide free health services and HIV tests for queer citizens.

Yet queer commons are not the only outcome of discontent with neoliberal dispossession—reactionary ethno-nationalisms that seek to enforce borders prove to be a much stronger and more widespread response to such conditions today.⁴ We believe that the distinction between these two results lay in the continual practice of “the impossible politics of difference” that demands a radical rethinking of self and community, and thus a radical rethinking of belonging and the concept of commons itself (Hong 2015). Hong (2015: 15) theorizes “‘difference’ as a contradictory, *impossible* political and representational strategy that brings together and holds in suspension the conflicting goals of the preservation or the protection of the political subjects *and* the recognition of the others at whose expense that subject is protected.” The unrelenting recognition of whom our struggle for survival might harm distinguishes queer commons from practices of self-preservation that readily take racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and otherwise exclusionary forms. If this is the contribution of queer to commons, the contribution of commons to queer is in its refusal to think respectability politics as divorced from material dispossession, and the increased securitization of peoples and borders. The execution of the latter is increasingly justified with discourses that position immigrants and refugees as morally suspect (Malkki 1992). These are the challenges the two terms have to relentlessly pose to each other. This is necessary in order to have genuine conversations about the uneven belonging and dispossession witnessed in all “commons” historically so that we can imagine new ones.

Notes

We are equal co-authors of this piece.

1. While the introduction of neoliberal measures in Turkey dates back to 1980, there has been an intensification of them since the early 2000s. For more, see Özbay et al. 2016.
2. Trans women have also occasionally occupied some of these spaces, but this has made them often subject to violence both by the police and by vigilantes. Therefore, it is unclear whether we can argue that they have had proper “access” to older forms of commons.
3. The allegation was subsequently denied by the mosque’s imam (www.hurriyet.com.tr/dolmabahce-camii-imami-halil-necipoglu-cami-icerisinde-alkol-kullanani-gormedim-29264724).
4. While a detailed analysis of the current moment in Turkey is beyond the remit of the

present article, we would like to note that following the July 2016 coup attempt, and under the “de facto presidential rule without any checks and balances” (Arat 2016), the government has sacked and jailed tens of thousands in opposition and continues to promote patriarchal policies (Cindoglu and Unal 2016). While no other commons like Gezi has emerged since then, the resistance to the government continues. As the current authoritarian leadership labels any and all opposition “terrorism,” this broad use inadvertently contributes to the public questioning of the very term *terrorism*, as well as the public questioning of both the current and historical forms of the Turkish security state and the Turkish nationalism it promoted.

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