

## **Between the Universal and the Particular: The Politics of Recognition of LGBT Rights in Turkey**

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LGBT rights have recently been put on the agenda of international law and human rights. In 2006 a group of human rights experts convened at Gadkah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia drafted a set of principles in related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In their introduction to what is since then known as the Yogyakarta Principles, the co-chairpersons of the meeting explain that “The international response to human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity has been fragmented and inconsistent. To address these deficiencies a consistent understanding of the comprehensive regime of international human rights law and its application to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity is necessary.” (International Commission of Jurists, 2007: 6-7) In 2008 the French and Dutch representatives proposed a resolution with the support of the European Union to the United Nations General Assembly in support of LGBT rights. The Organization of Islamic Conference supported a statement arguing that the proposal “threatened to undermine the international framework of human rights by trying to normalize pedophilia, among other acts.” (MacFarquhar, 2010; United Nations General Assembly, 2008) As it stands ninety-four states have signed the statement. In 2011 the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution proposed by South Africa requesting a study on discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011). In 2011 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted a report to the Council with the title “Discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.” (United Nations General Assembly, 2011)

We can expect with reason that the LGBT-related human rights issues will continue to be on the international agenda and divide the international society in the future. Interestingly, both sides of the debate make references to universalizing and particularizing narratives simultaneously to justify their arguments. Those who oppose the international recognition of LGBT rights base their arguments on the one hand to a universalistic narrative emphasizing the rule of national sovereignty and non-interference while also pointing out the prevalence of homophobia in many societies as an indication of its universal appeal. On the other hand, the opponents also resort to a particularistic narrative highlighting national or local culture. The proponents of the recognition of LGBT rights argue in return that LGBT rights are human rights and that the global prevalence homophobia is partly due to the colonial diffusion of sexual norms. Reporting the debates in the UN General Assembly, the *New York Times* points out that “Although laws against homosexuality are concentrated in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, more than one speaker addressing a separate conference on the declaration noted that the laws stemmed as much from

the British colonial past as from religion or tradition.” (MacFarquhar, 2010) The diffusion of norms about sexuality as well as their embeddedness in local cultures will likely to remain contentious topics.

I argue that though the recognition of international LGBT rights remains an important resource for local LGBT movements across the globe, the main challenge for them lies in building political alliances with local actors. What these alliances will be built on and what concrete results they will yield are far from predictable and requires careful case studies. In this paper, I will demonstrate how debates about LGBT rights lie at the center of the identity construction of the dominant Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. The growing LGBT movement and its role in the Gezi protests of 2013 present an interesting case for ongoing theoretical debates about the universality and particularity of LGBT rights in the context of postcolonial theories. I suggest that Gezi protests bear important clues about how the LGBT movement can go beyond a politics of recognition and represent universality in its particularity.

### **The Quest for LGBT Rights: Between the Universal and the Subaltern**

The controversy over the international recognition of LGBT rights lies at the core of the debate over universality and particularity, identity and difference, hegemony and subalternity. Judith Butler states the problem as follows:

“[...] There is no cultural consensus on an international level about what ought and ought not to be a claim to universality, who may make it, and what form it ought to take. Thus, for the claim to work, for it to compel consensus, and for the claim, performatively, to enact the very universality it enunciates, it must undergo a set of transformations into the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and the force of universal claims are made. Significantly, this means that no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation... Without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through colonial and expansionist logic.” (Butler, 2000: 35)

Butler criticizes the liberal democratic theory of Habermas, Nussbaum and others, which use Kantian formalism to establish a purely formal method for adjudicating political claims (Butler, 2000: 15). Against Max Weber’s emphasis on the rationally irresolvable pluralism of competing value systems and beliefs (Callinicos, 1999: 154), this proceduralist approach defends a discourse ethics, which can lead to a rational, uncoerced consensus. Habermas argues in order to conceive the possibility of justifiable and criticizable claims to truth, one does not need to establish a value-ethics or a modern natural law, but turn to the fundamentals of reasonable speech, which underlie any practical discourse (Habermas 1973: 137-138). According to Habermas, all practical discourses allow consensus only when they are able to

generate “generalizable” (*verallgemeinerungsfähig*) interests (Habermas 1973: 152). Every participant of a practical discourse has to be able to translate her/his subjective interest to a general interest (Habermas 1973: 150). In that context, every norm depends upon reasonable, justifiable and criticizable discourses that generate generalizable interests and consequently, consensus.

Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, on the other hand, criticize Habermas’ consensus-oriented approach for neglected the antagonistic nature of politics. The debate is highly significant for a discussion of global solidarity considering that, compared to domestic political systems, the current international system provides much weaker procedures for the formulation and enforcement of human rights and much weaker conceptions of the common good. As the debates over humanitarian interventions reveal, the question of transnational justice and global community cannot be solved in the abstract. Mouffe reinterprets Carl Schmitt’s political theory according to which the question in a conflict situation is not how the decision is made but who eliminates doubts and differences in opinion and decides (Schmitt, 1998 (1932): 35). The struggle for legitimacy is always a political struggle over the definition of the public good (Mouffe 2005). In a democracy, Laclau argues, “the people” or the popular identity is constructed by a hegemonic discourse, which simultaneously connects popular demands through a universalist equivalential logic and distinguishes them from non-popular or anti-popular demands through a particularistic logic of difference (Laclau 2007).

Judith Butler concurs with Laclau and Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy theorists, but also asks: “do we always know whether a claim is particular or universal, and what happens when semantics of the claim, governed by political context, renders the distinction undecidable?” (Butler, 2000: 33) In this regard, the quest for LGBT rights confounds the prevalent distinction between the universal and the particular by revealing the exclusionary character of the universal. The attempt to reconstruct human right to include LGBT rights exposes “the limitation of the human, the term that sets the limits on the universal reach of international law.” (Butler, 2000: 39)

Rather than the diffusion of a universal discourse ethics enabling consensus, Butler uses the metaphor of translation, but she still cherishes the possibility of lesbian and gay international rights: “An anti-imperialist or, minimally, nonimperialist conception of human rights must call into question what is meant by the human and learn from the various ways and means by which it is defined across cultural venues.” (Massad 2004: 37 citing Judith Butler, 2004: 37.) Thus, according to Butler, international LGBT rights have the capacity to redefine what is the definition of human in different cultural contexts. In response, Joseph Massad launches a serious critique against the notion of international LGBT rights, claiming that it reproduces the Orientalism of the global human rights discourse and the imperialist/colonial logic imbedded in it. Massad argues that he is “sympathetic to the political project of an all-encompassing utopian inclusivity”, but “less sanguine about its feasibility and more worried about its cruelty.” (Massad 2004: 42)

In contrast to the particularistic criticisms in the UN General Assembly, Massad's critique claims not to rest on nativism, but instead to reveal the nativism of the notion of international LGBT rights (Massad 2004: 42). In this regard, Massad asserts:

“The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating. In doing so, the human rights advocates are not bringing about the inclusion of the homosexual in a new and redefined human subjectivity, but in fact are bringing about her and his exclusion from this redefined subjectivity altogether while simultaneously destroying existing subjectivities organized around other sets of binaries, including sexual ones...” (Massad 2004: 41)

Massad defines the “missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations [such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) MSB], that represent them” as the Gay International (Massad 2004: 161). Drawing on Foucault, Assad identifies the project of the Gay International as “incitement to discourse” producing LGBT identities and discourses where they did not exist previously (Massad 2004: 174). This discourse elicits either support or opposition to a universally defined gayness and thus, not only produces gayness, but also the opposition to gayness. This opposition turns against various sexual and social practices, which have not been defined as gay prior to Western intervention.

Massad points out that the Gay International's campaigns in the early 1980s coincides with the rise of Islamism, the Iranian Revolution, and the outbreak of AIDS (Massad 2004: 177). In this context, the Islamist critique of Western interventionism also responded to the Gay International's incitement to discourse. The Gay International's use of the same organizations that are being used by US imperialism increased the sense that gay identity was a penetration of Western culture and thus, perceived as a threat to Islamism's quest for social regeneration. Thus, Islamist discourses about sexual deviance increased in the 1990s as a response to the Gay International's practices. Interpreting the raids on gays and their persecution in Egypt, Massad claims that “it is not the same-sex practices that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek.” (Massad 2004: 183)

In this regard, Massad claims that the Gay International reproduces the Western views of the Arabs and do not “question the superiority of the Western notion of the human” as Butler would have it (Massad 2004: 47). Rather than posing a challenge to each other both the Gay International (and its Western assimilationist allies consisting mainly of middle and upper-middle classes exposed to Western culture in

the diaspora or in the homeland) and the Islamist operate with the same Western sexual epistemology and together reproduce the hegemonic sexual practices, identities and desires (Massad 2004: 48-50).

Though Massad's critique of the Gay International's embeddedness in a world of inequality and the liberal imperialism is powerful, I argue that in his attempt to reveal the Western-centricism of the universal LGBT rights he also denies the reality of existing of LGBT and queer identities, their struggles and their transformative capacity in their homeland. More importantly, it does not tackle the question of what kind of strategies are available to sizeable LGBT-identifying communities in a country like Turkey. Though Massad restricts his analysis to the Arabs, his argument about the Gay International's incitement of discourse would be valid for Turkey as well. Though Turkey's LGBT activists are to a large extent middle classes exposed Western education and cooperate with the Gay International, their ranks also include lower middle classes and the urban poor. Beyond the activists, the larger LGBT community encompasses all kinds of people from different class, ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds. Recent years also witnessed the spread of activist groups in the provincial towns of Anatolia. There are currently over 10 legal associations and over 20 university campus groups operating in Turkey. Multiple factors facilitate the diffusion of LGBT communities and activism, which cannot be reduced to Massad's Gay International.

There are several problems with Massad's argument that make it hard to apply to Turkey's case. First, though Massad points out the functions of human rights universalism for US imperialism and the role of Westernized middle classes in their diffusion, he never questions what made universalism, imperialism and Westernized middle classes possible, i.e. global capitalism. Neither the emergence of the Gay International nor the diffusion of sexual desires and identities can be understood without a proper understanding of the dynamics of the global movement of capital and its social and political consequences. Focusing on the effects of tourism, cultural products and human rights campaigns, Massad neglects why these phenomena are part and parcel of the movement of capital in the non-West. Not only the Gay International, but various venues of searching for sex, through associations, clubs, and internet sites; the changing definitions and modes of attractiveness, beauty, fashion, sexual and other bodily practices *in toto* are diffusing through the investment of capital. Where the Gay International cannot reach, the movement of capital will.

The contemporary resurgence of Islamism can also be explained as a symptom of global capitalism. . The neoliberal restructuring of global capital drained the various resources of Middle Eastern states, whose state-led capitalism was legitimized by generation of employment and distribution of rent. The adaptation of these authoritarian states was impossible without losing their legitimacy. Islamist solidarity networks responded to the social demands of a population, which was increasingly impoverished and was becoming insecure in an age of global capital mobility (Rosefsky Wickham, 2002; Henry and Springborg, 2005). Thus, the rise of

Islamism and the diffusion of LGBT identities have been part of the same socio-economic phenomenon since the late 1960s, namely the reorganization of global capitalism (Castells, 1998).

This perspective allows us to identify political possibilities for LGBT movements in the non-West, which are not available in Massad's account. In the rest of the paper, I want to demonstrate how the LGBT movement in Turkey can be a leading actor in a counter-hegemonic political coalition based on anti-capitalist social movements. Drawing on Laclau's work, I want to ask the question how the LGBTs can claim to represent the people or in other words, how they can represent universality. I argue that the Gezi protests of May/June of 2013 reveal the possibility of an LGBT politics, which goes beyond the Gay International's rights-based activism and liberal identity politics.

Turkey presents an interesting case for Massad's argument, since the Ottoman society had a similar cultural attitude towards the diversity of sexual practices and shared a common cultural legacy with the Arabs. However, Turkey's particularity cannot be reduced to culture and identity, but has to be specified with regard to its location in the global capitalist division of labor. Being a member of NATO over half a century, a country in the Customs Union with the EU for 20 years and a candidate for the EU membership, Turkey is far more integrated with the center of global capitalism than any other country with an overwhelming Muslim majority. This makes Turkey also a unique case in the development of Islamism and the LGBT movement. The consequences of neoliberal reforms and export-oriented development strategy, imposed by the coup of 1980, created a rising small and middle-size Anatolian businessmen, who became the backbone of Islamism in the 1990s. However, the rise of conservative capitalists also led to a transformation of Islamism in the course of the 1990s. Thus, Turkey's Islamists tamed their anti-capitalism and facilitated the absorption of their constituency into global capitalism (Tuğal 2009). The political result of this social transformation was the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as the dominant actor in Turkish politics. AKP's formulation of "conservative democracy" and its attempt to transform Turkish politics in its own image has been accompanied by a reinvention of Turkish identity, democracy and citizenship. It is in this context that the rise of the LGBT movement in took place.

### **The LGBT and the Politics of Turkish Identity**

Turkey refrained from the vote on LGBT rights in the UN General Assembly, which led to the protests by LGBT organizations. The current debates in Turkish politics about homosexuality demonstrate how heteronormativity is playing an important role as Turkey is negotiating its identity in the process of re-asserting itself as a key regional actor upholding international norms, applying for membership in the EU and drafting a new constitution. A brief account of the AKP, the dominant party in

Turkish politics, is essential to reveal the significance of the recognition of LGBT rights for the current Turkish politics and foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

The AKP, which has been in power since its electoral victory on 3 November 2002, articulated a political discourse combining conservatism with liberalism. The same time period also attested the consolidation of the LGBT movement in Turkey. The demands of the LGBT community significantly challenge the AKP's conservative-liberal synthesis, revealing the fault line between a liberal narrative based on universal human rights and democracy, and a conservative narrative based on particular values and identities. Since their party's foundation, AKP's leaders were eager to dispel any affiliation with Islamism and instead promoted themselves as "conservative democrats." This new identity was also promoted as a model for the larger Middle East and provided a justification for a more assertive Turkish foreign policy. AKP leaders claimed that its unique geopolitical, cultural and political location in world politics allowed Turkey to act as an arbitrator between the West and the East and that Turkey's experience in Western-style secular democracy made it a model for the rest of the Muslim world.

The AKP employs the rhetorical devices of a populist subaltern nationalism to consolidate the party's rule in Turkey. Its success lies in its execution of neoliberal reforms with a populist rhetoric as a legitimating discourse, which interpellates a democratic populist subject. Like other populist movements the AKP rose to power in the context of an economic, social and political crisis. Claiming to represent the wise yet silent majority, populist discourses constitute a political subject based on two central concepts: the heartland and the people (Taggart 2000, Laclau 2007). These discourses identify technocratic and degenerate elites, powerful minorities, organized interest groups, complex political institutions and processes as the enemies of the people. Thus, the populist discourse employs two strategies: emphasizing the distinctiveness and particularity of certain social demands; and claiming the sameness and equality of the demands. Laclau identifies the former strategy based on othering as the "logic of difference," and the latter resting on a common identity as the "equivalential logic." (Laclau 2007: 96) Both logics facilitate the construction of the populist subject, which signifies the people and its enemies. The most significant aspect of the AKP is to forge a coalition of both the winners and losers of neoliberalism: the rising Anatolian bourgeoisie and the urban poor (Hale and Özbudun, 2010; Öniş, 2006; Tuğal, 2007). The AKP's ability to legitimize neoliberal reforms, which necessitates the centralization and concentration of political authority to implement policies dismantling a social regime, lies at the core of its political success.

The foreign policy discourse of the AKP follows the same narrative of neoliberal populism in domestic politics. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as advisor both to Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül until he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, presents this discourse in a systematic fashion. The Davutoğlu Doctrine is an

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<sup>1</sup> The following discussion is based on Birdal (2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

extension of the AKP's populist discourse in international politics. In Davutoğlu's view, self-confidence and identity are the preconditions for a pro-active Turkish strategy and the lack thereof is attributed to the lack of self-confidence and identity of previous Turkish regimes (Davutoğlu, 2008: 10-11). Davutoğlu criticizes two attitudes within the Turkish elite of the 1990s: the Kemalist elite skeptical of globalization and the pro-globalization liberal elite. The former lack self-confidence because of their lack of popular support and therefore, all they can do is to adopt an introverted, defensive strategy, which is bound to lose. The latter, on the other hand, have no sense of identity and embrace the imperatives of globalization with no strategic vision whatsoever. The main problem of Turkish foreign policy according to the Davutoğlu Doctrine is the same problem in Turkish domestic politics identified by the AKP's populist rhetoric: the decadent elite. It reflects the basic contention of the AKP that throughout the history of the republic Turkey has been subjected to the dominance of a bureaucratic, culturally alienated and politically predominant elite to the detriment of the people.

In this context, the definition of a self-confident Turkish identity is an essential and indispensable part of the AKP's foreign policy approach. Yalçın Akdoğan, advisor to the AKP's leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, provides a semi-official definition of "conservative democracy" drawing on modern conservative political theory. In Akdoğan's view, modern conservatism and liberalism share a commitment to free market, but in distinction to liberalism, conservatism also seeks the restoration of authority in the social field (Akdoğan 2004: 38-45, 58). Conservative democracy invokes the principles of participatory democracy as respect for, and recognition of difference as well as consensus based on mutual tolerance (Akdoğan 2004: 65-66). Pursuing a policy of tolerance is not only an ethical question, but also a political imperative in the age of identity politics. Akdoğan asserts that the twin processes of globalization and localization unleashed certain social groups' demands for recognition of their identity. While politicians must respond to these demands of identity politics, they must do so without alienating certain identity groups. Thus, in order to maintain social peace, conservative democracy needs to create a pluralistic political environment in which all identity groups feel mutual respect. This environment is reinforced by "national values" (*milli değerler*), a central pillar of Turkish conservatism (Akdoğan 2004: 70-71). This reliance on a set of substantive values is the crux of conservative democracy's incompatibility with liberal democracy. In Akdoğan's narrative, in which the liberal dichotomy between civil society and the state is replaced by a yearning for the fusion of the state and the nation: "The reconsolidation of the democratic regime is the fundamental precondition for the peaceful coexistence of social differences, for the fusion of the state and the nation to occur and for the restoration of the corroding system." (Akdoğan 2004: 67)

For Akdoğan, socialization through family, school, and community is the most important mechanism procuring the fusion of the public good with national values, and merging the state with the nation. He states: "For conservatism, the most important social institution is the family. The most negative aspect of the modern era

is the dissolution of the family, which is the carrier of tradition and social values.” (Akdoğan 2004: 50) He emphasizes that even the conservatives most sympathetic to modernization assert that Westernization needs to be a selective process in order to prevent social degeneration (Akdoğan 2004: 53). Akdoğan stresses that tradition is essential to nation-building and maintaining social peace in a pluralistic political environment (Akdoğan 2004: 54). In his view, “political legitimacy is (...) based on the common acceptance of a national identity that expresses itself in commonly held norms regarding action, rules, and collective worth.” (Akdoğan 2006: 50) Thus, Akdoğan warns against separatist, destabilizing, and marginal demands:

“Raising consciousness about protecting rights and respecting other’s rights is as important as knowing one’s own rights. The most important point in human rights is for everyone to possess human rights consciousness and human responsibility. Human rights should not be regarded as ‘separatist’ and destabilizing ‘marginalizing’ demands, but to the contrary as a meta-value (*üst değer*) aggregating the will of individuals and groups to live together and thereby, creating a general consensus and domestic peace.” (Akdoğan 2004: 75)

By constructing the AKP as the agent representing the people and defending the national values against the elites and degenerates, conservative democracy becomes a hegemonic, rather than deliberative project. In this hegemonic discourse, the AKP’s electoral victories are interpreted as its license to represent and define national values and distinguish the others. In this context, conservative democracy resorts to an “invention of tradition” as an indispensable part of its political project. An invented tradition is “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” (Hobsbawm, 1997: 1) Invention of tradition is characterized by a constant tension between the need to respond to novel situations and attempting to construe certain parts of social life as unchanging (Hobsbawm, 1997: 2). Political instrumentalization primarily differentiates invented tradition from custom and convention. In contrast to the latter two, the invented tradition’s main function is symbolic, ritualistic, and ideological rather than being technical and practical. Topics such as family, school, and community are symbolic aspects of the conservative democratic invention of tradition. In this regard, sexual deviance, signifying ultimate degeneration of the nation, constitutes the main dilemma for the rearticulation of Turkish conservatism within the conceptual universe of liberal democracy and multiculturalism.

Akdoğan’s conception of conservative democracy raises the question of who gets to decide which demand is separatist, destabilizing and marginal. Since underprivileged groups are subject to misrecognition their demands for recognition of equal moral and social status is usually construed as separatist, destabilizing and marginal. Thus, assessing whether a certain demand for recognition warrants the protection of law and human rights based on their compatibility to a vaguely defined “general

consensus and domestic peace” can with a strong likelihood reproduce misrecognition. As such, LGBTs’ demands of equality and justice can easily be subjugated to their conformity with a politically constructed national identity. The conservative discourses on the LGBT present significant evidence of how such a majoritarian conception of human rights and democracy provide a basis for discrimination, misrecognition, and humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

The exclusionary practice of conservative democracy is revealed by LGBT groups struggle in the recent discussions about a new constitution. The LGBT organizations published their demands from the new constitutions and shared them with civil society activists as well as politicians. In their reports, they emphasized that constitutional references to “general morality,” “public order,” and “manners” serve as legitimating concepts of discrimination against the LGBT (Sosyal Politikalar, Cinsiyet Kimliği ve Cinsel Yönelim Çalışmaları Derneği (SPoD) Çalışma Grubu, 2012: 5). Such general clauses allow the state to conceal a discriminatory administrative practice or an exclusionary political order in the form of a legal decision of a judge (Neumann, 1937: 581). Thus, the elements of a substantive Turkish identity, which form the core of the AKP’s populist discourse, function as legitimating concepts to exclude the LGBTs from the protection of the law.

The AKP’s distinction between economic and political modernization and the preservation of family and culture follows the same logic identified by Partha Chatterjee with regard to postcolonial nationalism. Chatterjee distinguishes between the problematic and the thematic features of an ideology. The problematic involves the identification of historical possibilities or the practical program of an ideology, which is justified by the latter’s claims of validity, while the thematic is an epistemological and ethical system warranting practical inferences. Chatterjee argues that postcolonial nationalism changes the problematic, but retains the thematic aspect of nationalism. In other words, postcolonial nationalism reasons within the same epistemological and ethical universe of colonial nationalism, despite the former’s political opposition to the latter (Chatterjee, 1999: 38). Prior to challenging colonialism, postcolonial nationalism first constitutes its own sovereign sphere by dividing the social world into a material and a spiritual domain. In the material domain of economy, statecraft, science, and technology, anticolonialism acknowledges Western superiority and warrants the imitation of Western institutions. However, in the spiritual domain of culture, religion and family, anti-colonialism asserts its superiority over Western culture (Chatterjee, 1999: 52). In current Turkish politics the discourses on the LGBTs are articulated within the context of the AKP’s attempt to redefine Turkish identity using both a universalist liberal discourse with an emphasis on democratic procedure and a particularistic conservative discourse with an emphasis on substantive traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of conservative discourses on the LGBT see: Birdal (2013b).

As much as AKP's conservative democracy presents itself as a critique of Kemalism, uses the same postcolonial logic of identity construction identified by Chatterjee. The clash between the two results from the rise of a new Anatolian bourgeoisie, as a result of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980, and its challenge to the power of the established bourgeoisie, which is the product of the early Republic in the late 1920s. However, as the two social groups mingle, one can predict that the cultural conflicts between them will subside. This is a major risk for the AKP, since only against a common cultural enemy can it hold the new bourgeoisie and the urban poor together. Thus, after a period of liberal democratic reforms the AKP turned increasingly to a conservative discourse casting aside its alliance with liberals and their ideas. At the peak of this process, when the AKP leader Erdoğan was preparing for a change from a parliamentary to a presidential system consolidating his populist personal rule, a small protest in Gezi Park in the center of Istanbul ignited a series of massive street movements. The protests cut across the extant ideological and political cleavages and thus, posed a serious risk for Erdoğan's populist binaries of people versus elites. Furthermore, they increased the visibility and the legitimacy of the LGBT movement to an unprecedented extent, and thus provided an opportunity for the movement to engage with various actors across class and identity divisions, to move beyond identity politics and thus, to have an effect on national politics.

### **LGBT Politics After Gezi: Can the LGBT Represent the People?**

How does the LGBT movement posit itself within the political context of AKP's neoliberal populism? Like the AKP, the LGBT movement also resorts to both universalizing and particularizing discourses. On the one hand, it refers to universal human rights, democratic norms and civil liberties; on the other hand it presents a particular minority identity demanding to be recognized. The LGBT movement replicates the master narrative of post-colonial modernization, as laid out by Chatterjee, which has been used both by Kemalism and the AKP. In this context, it is politically highly significant to pose the question whether the LGBTI movement can subvert the logic of this identity construction. But let me first begin by explaining why I think the subversion of the postcolonial master-narrative is necessary.

I assert that as long as the LGBTI movement reiterates the postcolonial politics and its master-narrative about modernity and authenticity, it will inevitably be bound by current political cleavages, which reproduce the neoliberal hegemony. In the current context of Turkish politics increasingly polarized by AKP's populism, the LGBT movement runs the risk of becoming subordinated to the conservative-secularist polarization rather than allying itself with other progressive social movements to create an anti-hegemonic alternative. I contend that such a trajectory will increasingly constrain the emancipatory potential and the unity of the movement and reduce it to an instrument of a vicious culture war. Thus, I propose a radical democratic strategy of building and strengthening alliances with anti-systemic social movements, which will allow the LGBT movement to represent the universal, i.e. the people. This strategic shift, however, requires a change in the movement's approach

to rights-based politics and the politics of recognition, which are modeled after the LGBT movements in the West.

The possibility of a counter-hegemonic intervention appeared in the Gezi protests of May and June of 2013. These protests increased the visibility of LGBTs to an unprecedented extent and opened new venues for future alliances and the consolidation of old ones. The protests were based on a certain understanding of human and civil rights, such as the right to assemble, the right to association, the right to protest, free speech and the right to privacy and the freedom of conducting one's own life, i.e. choosing one's own lifestyle. At the same time, they were expressions of discontents with the neoliberal working regime, city planning and governance based on rent distribution and the discontent of the so-called white-collar precariat about job security.

Massive protests broke out on May 28, 2013 as the police raided the tents of a handful of urban activists occupying the Gezi Park, adjacent to Taksim Square, to prevent the construction of a shopping mall on the park. Inspired by the Occupy movements in the West, these activists have been protesting various projects, which were part of the so-called urban transformation imposed by the AKP government and the AKP municipality.<sup>3</sup> Urban transformation involves the appropriation of public urban land and handing it over to construction companies, often politically aligned with the AKP government, which build expensive residences or shopping malls. Urban transformation constitutes the backbone of AKP's growth strategy and reflects the restructuring of the urban space as a means of social control. While projects in various parts of the city could be sold to existing inhabitants through rent distribution (with the promise of new, better, and more expensive homes), the projects around Taksim and Beyoğlu, the cultural heart of Istanbul, provoked a series of protests. The gentrification of this area was designed to turn it into a tourism spot filled with expensive coffee shops, bars, restaurants, galleries, hotels and shopping malls. The destruction of a historical movie theater and the closing of a historical pastry shop also led to criticism about how urban transformation is destroying the cultural fabric of the city and turning it into a gigantic open-air shopping area. This destruction was also regarded as the AKP's attempt to stamp its conservative identity on the city. Municipal regulations restricting the coffee shops, restaurants and bars to provide service outdoors and regulations of the sale of alcohol coinciding with Erdoğan's to constrain access to abortion and his public talks recommending each family to raise at least 3 children were perceived as the footsteps of a creeping authoritarianism. Since Erdoğan's populist discourse increasingly polarized the society to achieve his goal of establishing a presidential system, larger and diverse social groups grew wary of the AKP. In this context, the brutal attack against Gezi occupiers who stopped the construction machines led to an unprecedented gathering of hundreds of thousands of people. On the night of May 31, clashes between the police and the protestors reached a high point and continued on the next day. On June 1 as the police withdrew, the protestors occupied the entire

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<sup>3</sup> For an early account of the protests see my piece: Birdal (2013d).

Taksim and Beyoğlu area, erected barricades and turned the Gezi Park into a commune with a free kitchen, a playing ground for children, a vegetable garden, a library, a veterinarian, a first aid clinic. Thousand started to stay over night in tents and organized discussion forums, workshops, music concerts, art performances, yoga classes. Although the park commune was dispersed by a police attack on June 15, the protesters turned to local parks to gather and established neighborhood forums, social media networks and continued to launch street protests on certain occasions.

Gezi protests brought together diverse social movements: soccer fans, feminists, ecologists, Kemalists, nationalists, Kurds, Armenians, anti-capitalist Muslims, LGBTI, communists, anarchists, liberals, libertarians, artists, workers, students, white collar middle classes. They came together in a common opposition to AKP's neoliberal populism. The peaceful communal life of individuals belonging to diverse and often conflicting identities posed a real threat to AKP's social disciplining project attempting to impose a monolithic identity and lifestyle. The peaceful coexistence of these identities made the AKP's ideological stance appear like a polarizing rather than a unifying force in Turkish society. This was very problematic for a party claiming to represent the people as a totality. This perception damaged the AKP's image both domestically and internationally.

AKP's main strategy against Gezi was to launch a campaign calling its constituents to the defense of the charismatic leader they identified with. The main aim of this campaign was to consolidate the party elites, rank and file and the social base behind the powerful image of the prime minister. The protests were perceived to have validated the criticism by President Abdullah Gül, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, Speaker of the Parliament Cemil Çiçek, the powerful Gülen community and the liberals against Erdoğan's imposition of a presidential system. Against a possible crack among the party ranks and factions, Erdoğan's circle insisted on the indispensability of his leadership. International conspiracy theories and fabricated stories about how the protesters drank alcohol in a mosque or how half naked men attacked a veiled women, peed on her and rubbed their genitals against her hair circulated widely in the media strictly controlled by the government. These propaganda narratives both mobilized the social base around an imminent threat and forced factions of the AKP coalition to choose their sides either with or against Erdoğan. Despite these attempts rumors spread that Deputy Prime Minister Arınç left the cabinet meeting and attempted to resign only to be persuaded by President to stay. The most famous of Anatolian industrialist from Kayseri, Mustafa Boydak, whose been known for his close relation to Gül declared his support for the wealthiest Turkish industrial Koç dynasty, which has been targeted by Erdoğan for offering shelter and first aid to protesters under police raid. Boydak expressed mild criticism that the protests have not been approached with empathy (Birdal and Tarhan 2013).

Given its failure in foreign policy and the lingering potentiality of an economic crisis Erdoğan's attempt to build his presidential regime required the deepening of

political polarization along a secularist vs. religious axis. Thus, Erdoğan's response to Gezi protests was designed to control the public discourse in order to pull the struggle towards a discursive ground, on which he had been training for years: the culture war. Indeed, part of the Gezi protestors identifying more or less as secularists (within the given cleavages of Turkish politics) have reacted to Erdoğan's jabs just the way he hoped for. If he manipulated the public discourse to frame Gezi as an attempt of the old secularist/nationalist elite to go back to the military-dominated 1990s, he could persuade the Kurds and the liberals to stay away from the protests. This would have brought an end to the new socio-political dynamics, which emerged in Gezi. Although the protestors expressed their anger at Erdoğan, their experiences in the park provided an alternative populism to AKP's neoliberal populism with Erdoğan as the common other and the various social demands connected through an equivalential logic (Birdal 2013e).

The LGBTs stood at the fore front of Gezi movements. During the protests they invented new slogans subverting gender roles and using femininity as a form of protest, which have been accepted and used by non-LGBT protesters as well.<sup>4</sup> The LGBTs have been one of the most visible social groups participating in Gezi protests. Like other groups, they camped in Gezi Park and founded the LGBT Block. Most people who gathered in the camping ground of the LGBT Block have not been activists prior to Gezi. The Block was not dominated by any existing LGBT organizations, but it acted as the collectivity of the protestors. In the park the young LGBTs went around with rainbow flags and shouted slogans which increased their visibility and enhanced their influence. Their visibility also helped to dispel the AKP propaganda framing the protests as a conspiracy of the old, nationalist, Kemalist elite in order to bring back a military rule. The LGBT visibility continued to increase after the police raid on the Gezi Park commune on June 15. Despite the continuing police brutality in the aftermath of June 15, Istanbul Pride March of June 25 has been the most crowded and most cheerful in all the march's 20 years history. According to media reports, the march was attended by 50,000 people, who shouted LGBT slogans of Gezi. With thousands of Gezi protesters of all social and political backgrounds attending, this march was a prime example of how the LGBTI represented Gezi. From a suppressed sexual minority they rose to being a symbol of liberty and equality.

The beautification projects, which spread throughout Turkey after June 15 in an attempt of the citizens to reclaim public space from the government, provided an interesting example of LGBT's rise to a universal symbol of Gezi. In late August, a retired engineer Hüseyin Çetinel and his son-in-law decided to carry out a beautification project with no political aim by painting the staircase in their neighborhood around Taksim in rainbow colors (Erçiçek, 2013). The next morning when the AKP governed municipality painted them back to grey, the rainbow stairs

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<sup>4</sup> The slogan #direnayol (which translates as #resistayol. Ayol is an exclamation commonly associated with women, feminine gay men and transsexuals) was both graffitied on the street and circulated widely in the social media. Another slogan, which was widely used after Gezi goes "Where are you my love? Here I am" followed by repeated shouts "ay ay ay ay" (a feminine exclamation).

became an instant phenomenon in the social media. As the news and images circulated under the hashtag #resiststaircase, protestors all over Turkey started posted pictures of their beautification projects: staircases, sidewalks, streets, crosswalks, rails, speed bumps in rainbow colors. Rainbow colors, associated with the LGBT especially in the aftermath of the much acclaimed Pride March, now represented not only the resistance but also the attempt of a mobilized citizenry to reclaim of the urban public sphere.

As the observations presented here suggest, new opportunities and risks should lead the LGBT movement to reevaluate its strategic goals and tactical maneuvering space. In a piece, I wrote with Mehmet Tarhan during the Gezi protests upon an invitation by the major LGBT organization KAOSGL, we predicted that the political debates within the LGBT community would increase and welcomed the expression of diverse political attitudes as a factor increasing the dynamism of the movement. We argued that this process is the inevitable result of the massification of the movement and it will help the movement to reach out to larger segments of the society and force the political actors in Turkey to be more responsive to LGBT demands. Though concerns about the unity of the movement are understandable, they are both unnecessary and undemocratic. We contended that the movement could rely on its tradition of pluralism and cooperation practices and even make a contribution to Turkish politics in this regard. Otherwise, the existing associations and organizations would be either ineffective or split up within an increasingly political LGBT movement in the context of a culture war (Birdal and Tarhan 2013).

When it emerged in the 1990s the LGBT movement in Turkey bore leftist and anarchist characteristics and drew support from feminists, anarchists and ecologists. These initial allies helped the movement to establish links with socialists. Crucial support came from the Kurdish movement, which has been undergoing a major ideological change since the capture and the incarceration of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 by the Turkish government. Starting from the mid-2000s with the help of the women's movement, the socialists, and the Kurdish movement the LGBTs gained recognition, visibility and a political space to advance its agenda. From then on, the movement increased its efforts for legal reform and established links with political parties. Again a crucial ally in this regard was the DTP, the pro-Kurdish party back then. In 2011 the DTP parliamentary group with the initiative of MP Osman Özçelik submitted a motion of parliamentary investigation regarding hate crimes against the LGBT.<sup>5</sup> Connections with DTP and later on, BDP, and finally HDP, proved essential for the participation of LGBT associations in the parliamentary debates on the new constitution. Although no new constitution came out of this process, the effort itself allowed the LGBT movement to make new contacts in the political establishment. An important step in this regard was the movement's connection to the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), the center-left, secularist, nationalist main opposition party, which founded the Republic. The CHP has been seeking to present itself as the new democratic force against the AKP, whose populist

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<sup>5</sup> The text available at: <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/10/10-1043.pdf>.

rhetoric framed the CHP as an elitist and statist actor, trying to prevent the nation's will from coming to power and reestablish the tutelage (*vesayet*) of the judicial, civil and military bureaucracy. In this public discourse the AKP claimed to represent the religious people and that the CHP represented the secularist state bureaucracy. A faction, the so-called the "New CHP", has been trying to shed old baggage and refashion the party replacing the emphasis on secularism with an emphasis on personal liberty and respect for difference and pluralism. But still, nationalism remains an issue preventing the CHP to cooperate with the Kurdish movement (Uysal, 2011).

The relations of the LGBT movement with political parties took a different turn after the Gezi protests. Its ability to represent Gezi made the LGBT an attractive ally in the lead-up to local elections in March 2014. Since Gezi protests broke over urban transformation, local elections could be expected to have helped the protesters to reach out to the rest of the population. Erdoğan's strategy outlined above was geared toward rallying its social base behind him by demonizing Gezi protests and by splitting Gezi protestors. CHP's decision to ally itself with the ultra-nationalist National Movement Party (MHP) played into Erdoğan's hands and reproduced the established secular vs. Islamist cleavage. The fear that Erdoğan's victory would increase political repression and the nationalist distance toward the Kurdish movement among the secularists created a polarization within the LGBT movement. Meanwhile, the break of the influential Gülen community from the ranks of the AKP and their complicity in publicizing a series of tapes revealing the high level corruption in the higher echelons of AKP's rule led Erdoğan to resort to increasing authoritarianism. As the CHP allied itself with the ultra-nationalist MHP and the break-away Gülen community, the coalition forged between the three accused the Kurdish movement from secretly agreeing with Erdoğan to establish a presidential system with Kurdish votes in return for concession in the peace negotiations between the government and the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. This polarization between the CHP and the BDP/HDP, the two main political allies of the LGBT movement, increased the tensions within the movement and Gezi protestors at large.

In local elections both the CHP and the BDP/HDP had LGBTs run for municipal offices and competed for LGBT votes. But more importantly, for both parties the LGBT candidates were signifiers of Gezi and the promise of a democratic Turkey. This trend continues in the presidential campaign, in which the CHP allied itself with the ultra-nationalist MHP to designate a common candidate of nationalist-Islamist origins to run against Erdoğan. While the CHP-MHP candidate remained silent over LGBT issues, the HDP specifically emphasized that he intended to fight against homophobia and transphobia in this opening campaign speech. The LGBT community remains split between the CHP-MHP coalition and the HDP over who can be the carrier of democracy against the increasingly authoritarian AKP. The political conjuncture requires the LGBT movement to lead a discussion about its long-term goals and strategies as opposed to short-term electoral gains, in order to maintain its unity and diversity. Gezi protests have been a historical mark in the recognition of LGBT visibility, and in its aftermath the LGBT movement is still in the process of

formulating what to do with its visibility. In this context, it is important to remember Massad's criticism against the Gay International. Rather than replicating Western LGBT movements, the historical trajectory of the movement in Turkey presents a unique opportunity to transform itself into a universal radical democratic subject in the aftermath of Gezi.

### **LGBT Politics Beyond Recognition?**

The current debates about LGBT rights are couched in terms of universality and particularity. As the AKP government is striving for recognition of Turkey's higher status in international relations, it also reconstructs history and redefines dominant values. On the one hand, the AKP combines a universalist liberal and a particularistic conservative discourse, which underlies the claim that Turkey as part of the western club. On the other hand, the AKP employs the particular, substantive Turkish identity to legitimate its claim to represent the Turkish people. In other words, the same values that construct a particular Turkish identity in international politics constitute the universal Turkish identity in domestic politics. In this context, the LGBT are construed as the other of the Turkish nation. As the AKP government re-writes Turkish/Ottoman history in opposition to the Kemalist discourse, it retains the same subaltern discourse as Kemalism.

Gezi protests provided the vocabulary and the grammar of a new radical discourse, which can subvert the prevailing postcolonial narrative and break the antagonism between the secular and the Islamist modes of authoritarianism. The LGBT movement, in its internal diversity and pluralism and its political connections with major political actors in Turkey, represents a unique subject, which can represent universal interests of the people in its particularity. This possible outcome would not only radically change Turkish politics, but also the way we think about LGBT movements in the non-West.

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