Interview: Anarchists in the Turkish Uprising

CrimethInc.

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To follow up our coverage of the uprising in Turkey beginning from Taksim Square, we've conducted an interview with anarchists in İstanbul. They talk about the background of the revolt, the relationship between this uprising and others around the world, and its implications for the future of Turkey.

What preexisting organizations have played a role in this new explosion of social struggle?

The important thing about this rebellion is that there was no political organization leading the movement. No leader, no party. The explosion appeared on the third day of the protests about the park and trees. People went to the streets because of the violence and brutality of poliçe—that is, the violence of the state. There were also some other motivations driving people into the streets, but none of them is related to any political organization. It is an autonomous movement.

What tactics have been most important in the conflicts? Where did those tactics originally develop? How did they spread?

Although there is no political organization directing people, there are anarchists, leftists, and other people who were already organized. It is important to have experience in clashes; individuals from these political groups talk with the others about how to act in the streets, and everybody decides what to do. There were some important initiatives—like building barricades, and behind them people who supported the effort with first aid, cooking, and discussing what to do next. People were eager to talk more about what to do. This is a new thing here. Information was shared via fliers on the street and via social media about how to keep up with the movements of the police, how to respond to the gas bombs, and the rights of people who are arrested. I have to admit that people used Facebook and twitter in a useful way.

Compare the beginning of the Taksim Square occupation with previous protests, such as the demonstrations of May Day 2013. In both cases, who were the organizers, and what were their original goals? Why did the Taksim Square occupation in particular spark so much new participation?

OK, we have to clarify the starting point of the protests. This year has been the most repressive year yet for the social opposition. The government banned demonstrators from the square for May Day. That was the starting point, I think. There were also clashes on May Day. And after

May Day, we are not allowed to protest anything in Taksim. The government banned any kind of demonstration. So this made people angry. We were on streets after May Day to protest various things, but mainly this situation.

The new thing about this occupation is not about demands or ideas. The new thing is the reaction of the people who saw the violence of the state. Before the rebellion, things like "barricades," "gas masks," and "throwing stones at the police" seemed like bad notions for the people. This has changed a lot. Now the people are cheering for tear gas and singing songs about the barricades.

How have the Greek social struggles since December 2008 shaped the imaginations of people in Turkey? What about the recent uprisings in North Africa, and the Occupy movement in the US?

I think there are some similarities between the 2008 rebellion in Greece and 2013 in Turkey. There are some economic facts in both cases, but these are not the real reasons. The situations are, rather, the expressions of the people against the terror and violence of the state. When the police murdered Alexis [Grigoropoulos], the situation changed. The legitimacy of the state disappeared. People understood the real purpose of the state. This is the situation in Turkey now. The legitimacy of the state has disappeared.

The events of 2008 in Greece attracted the attention of anarchists in Turkey. There were solidarity actions (in which we were directly involved). It gave us an opportunity to talk about anarchism with the people. I don't know if this had any role in self-organizing our society. But at least I can say this: the rebels in Greece shaped the imagination of anarchists in Turkey.

After 2008, another rebellion occurred in Greece in 2010. We attribute more importance to this rebellion, because it was then that anarchists especially started to organize life and shape its context. This is important for anarchism and also for society as a whole. All analyses will be deficient without experience of possible future ways to organize our lives.

Our group, Revolutionary Anarchist Action, had the chance to discuss the similarities and differences with the comrades who came from Thessaloníki who were in the rebellions of 2008 and 2010. We organized an assembly in Taksim Square with the comrades who came for solidarity.

As for the Occupy movements, they seemed to attract people. But I have to say this: the Turkish rebellion is more than some reformist demands like the Occupies all around the world. The ones who embrace the Occupy movement in Turkey are liberal groups who are mostly talk about humanism, state democracy, and environmentalism and other issues like that.

Do participants in the protests see a connection between opposition to Erdoğan's power in Turkey and the ongoing struggles against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt? How strong is the dialogue between protesters in Turkey and Egypt?

There is no strong relation between the movements in Turkey and Egypt. We have some anarchist contacts, and we shared our thoughts on the rebellion in Egypt, and they shared theirs about the recent rebellion in Turkey. But it is really difficult to organize a common struggle. We have to organize the societies first.

Some people who are in streets use Turkish flags and Kemal flags, which are the symbols of the Kemalists. The main opposition party wants to direct the movement, but it is really difficult for them, because they do not have any logical perspective to mobilize the movement. Sometimes they are using the same language as the government—especially about the people or groups who clash directly with the police.

The demands of the people who are in streets cannot be limited by any kind of election, or referendum. The people who hold the Kemalist symbols are in the streets with Kurds, with leftists

and anarchists. They are now understanding the situation and changing their minds. They are understanding what "politics" really is.

But as I stated, there are also people from the main opposition party in the streets who wanted to change the way of action.

What is the effect of widely reported rhetoric like "we are not activists, we are the people" or "I am not a radical, I am a law-abiding citizen" from protesters?

Now, I have to separate these two expressions. "We are not activists, we are the people" is a very powerful way to express the spirit of the actions. The state tried to marginalize the actions from the beginning. This is the general strategy of the government: because they have the votes of the majority for 11 years, they are trying to define all the rest as the "marginal." The opposition on the streets was completely ignored and described as marginal in the mainstream media—for example, on May Day as I mentioned above.

Nevertheless, the Taksim revolt has changed this concept. The people on the streets were very diverse. Different groups of people had been oppressed in different ways. Through the government of AKP, many amendments affected different groups such as workers, women, LGBTs, Alevis, minorities. So "the marginal" lost its meaning, because everyone had become "marginal," so "the marginal" became "the people." The prime minister called the people who were included in the actions "bir kaç çapulcu," which means "a few looters." The people embraced this rhetoric against those attempts to marginalize the actions. For example, when the actions were reported on a TV channel as "marginal actions of the marginal groups," one man among the protesters appeared in the frame, slapped the reporter, and asked "Who do you say is marginal?" On a similar broadcast, a woman came into the frame and asked "Who is marginal?"

On the other hand, the Kemalist media emphasizes the depoliticized character of the people in the streets. This is important for them to control the movement. But the reality is not like this. "I am a law-abiding citizen" is not common rhetoric among the protesters. The anarchist character of the movement is clearer. But this does not mean every person in the rebellion is an anarchist. Other rhetoric is like "We are people on the street and against all police, ACAB."

Have there been debates about violence versus non-violence? What do most demonstrators feel that they have the "right" to do in protest? How has this changed? And how have people reacted to those who take more militant action?

Self-defense against violence is not even an issue during the clashes. But some leftist and Kemalist groups wanted to shape the movement as a non-violent thing. Yet, for example, two days ago there was a commemoration in the square for the people who were murdered by the police. The action for the commemoration was just to put flowers in the square—but police used violence again. So these situations change people's minds in favor of "self-defense" against the violent forces of the police.

Through the riot, many banks and global corporations were damaged, but also some local shops which are known to belong to fascists, or that belong to the mayor of İstanbul or people who have a close relation with the government. The rage of the people was concrete and the spirit of the riot has effected a militant character. A slogan on one of the banners can help to explain: "We are going to take back our freedom with interest, which you have taken in installments. –Interest Lobby."

It was signed "Interest Lobby," because Erdoğan tried to present these actions as "the game of the external powers" and blamed the "interest lobby."

What has been the role of social media in spreading the movement, and in limiting it?

When TV channels, newspapers, and mainstream media sites censored the actions, people used Facebook to inform each other—not just about the news, but also the information which was necessary for the next actions. Twitter was also another good resource for the protesters. People were sharing news about the situation at the barricades and the positions of the police, but also announcing the addresses of the infirmaries and the needs of the people. People used the "new media" to organize solidarity and support as well as actions. Even today, there is a lot of material circulating, like photos or videos of police violence. The people are reacting to the mainstream media and still effectively using the social media for communication.

Which of the repressive strategies of the authorities have failed, and which have succeeded?

They are still using violence. Now resistance is more legitimized. People's values have changed. The government is now talking about asking the people about every political strategy. But now people are trying to talk about political strategies that they want to realize without the state.

On the other hand, the state is going on in the same way. They have started a witch hunt on the social media. People's Facebook profiles or tweets are used to accuse people. Other than that, there have been many raids on political spaces, offices, newspapers, radio stations, and on the houses of the political people. Many people have been taken into custody and many of them are still in jail. Through the raids, the cases are made secret—which means that you cannot see your lawyer for 24 hours, and you don't know what you are accused of—and many irrelevant things are taken as "proof" in order to invent evidence or hide the evidence of the actions of the police. The state is using this riot to suppress all social opposition. Erdoğan has congratulated the police department for their conduct throughout the actions, despite the people they murdered. The police officer who shot Ethem Sarısülük—he died after being shot in the head—was judged and released by the court pending a trial. While this oppression is growing, the people are getting more and more full of rage, because of state terror and injustice.

How will this change the future of social struggles in Turkey?

This depends on the organized groups, I think. Because, to resist, it is important not just to continue the actions, but to think collectively, act collectively, and shape our lives collectively. The experiences we got from this rebellion will help in the next struggles, like in Greece in 2008 and 2010.

After the state's loss of legitimacy, if this is combined with anger against the capitalist process and resistance against social repression, and if this makes people self-organize the whole of life, then we are not afraid to talk about social revolution. But it is too early. These are the first steps for the social revolution in the future.

As our comrades said, "our century has been started."

With revolutionary solidarity,

Anarchists in Turkey — Revolutionary Anarchist Action

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