

8 Drones and Streets

On the Image Composition of the Tahrir and Gezi Occupations

Begüm Özden Fırat

In a photograph showing a roaring crowd from above, people cover the urban landscape like so many ants occupying a square. Another image brings us downward and a little closer: we see masses confronting security forces as a water cannon approaches. Another one captures the crowd as it disperses. Some protesters throw gas canisters back toward the police line, arms stretched, legs hanging in the air, in the thick of the gas cloud. An image of a naked man standing still in front of the police line, as if to say, “this is how fragile we are.” A photograph of a protester wearing a superhero costume walking down the street seems to be challenging the police by declaring: “We have secret powers.” Other images show hundreds of people talking to each other in the middle of a street. Gestures of a long-lasting discussion, hands swing in the air, heads nod, attentive eyes directed to each other. The raised fist, the V for victory sign held high, someone throwing a rock toward an unseen target, a body stretched out like an arch. A line of people holding flags on top of a mountain of ruins, street signs, and bricks. An image shows people eating together or sleeping out in the street in front of makeshift tents. Where are we? Is it Syntagma in Athens, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Tahrir in Egypt, Taksim in Istanbul? One cannot tell. The iconography and framing of each occupation is patterned consistently, suggesting an iconographic composition of political resistance and human resilience.

The final days of 2010 shook the world with an unexpected revolt erupting in Tunisia, quickly followed by another in Egypt in the early days of 2011.¹ In the years that followed, uprisings sprouted up in different corners of the world, one after the other. Even though each of them occurred in its specific historical, social, and political context, this was a global movement against the socio-economic consequences of neoliberal globalization. There were striking similarities between the uprisings in terms of movement organization and action repertoire: the occupation of public spaces was the main form of action; there were neither leaders, nor visible formal movement organizations such as political parties or unions involved; they were spontaneous and horizontally organized, ad hoc structures and initiatives organizing the everyday in the occupation.² Even though this cycle of contention, mostly referred to as the “movement of the squares,” was global—from Yemen to Hong Kong, from Brazil to Armenia, from Israel to Turkey, and then the USA, Spain, Bahrain, Greece, Bulgaria, Syria, and Ukraine, to name just a few—it was also specifically Mediterranean. It erupted in Tunisia and resonated in Egypt, Libya, Greece, Spain, Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Israel, and Syria, with smaller events taking place in Portugal and Italy. It seemed like the region had become a zone of promise for the end of neoliberal capitalism. The Mediterranean—its geographical borders expanding along a network of roads, passes, sea routes, ports, flows of goods, and

humans—this time stretched along a network of public squares in revolt. Along this network, images of revolutionary salutes were exchanged. The Spanish, inspired by Tahrir, occupied squares and prepared a banner that read “Let’s keep it silent. Do not wake the Greeks up!” Their whispers found a response in Athens upon the occupation of Syntagma Square, where their banner read: “We are awake. What time is it? It is time for them to go.” A new slogan was invented in Israel: “Tel Aviv, Cairo, the same revolution.” In Taksim a banner stated that the square was now Tahrir. Syrians, just like the people taking to the streets in Egypt and Tunisia, demanded the fall of the regime and chanted the same slogan, *al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want the overthrow of the regime). Images showed that there was a common culture of political protest consisting of the occupation of urban space, violent and non-violent rioting techniques, and the organization of a revolutionary everyday life of encampments. As such, images not only represented the uprisings but also constructed them as globalizing phenomena taking place in a common geography of unrest, which created a sense of coevalness between different historical time zones.

Currently, the movements surrounding the Mediterranean are facing a crisis. Wherever they have emerged, these uprisings shook existing political systems and sometimes even toppled them entirely, yet they proved not powerful enough to change the deeply rooted capitalist economic system as a whole. Ideals of dignity, equality, freedom, and the idea of revolution were not only pronounced but were put into practice in these uprisings, especially in the so-called communes of encampments. Yet this short-lived creation of “another world” in public space triggered a clampdown from the violent forces of the established order and the movements had to retreat, not only physically but also emotionally. A common culture of defeat spread while a military junta was established in Egypt, Greece surrendered to the European troika, a dictatorial regime was established in Turkey, imperialist interventions took place in Libya and Syria, and, finally, ISIS terror escalated. These events seemed to be the consequences of the popular uprisings in the Mediterranean, a harsh backlash against the expression of freedom. The melancholia felt by those who revolted stems not only from an ongoing state of defeat, but also and more importantly, from not having a political “cause” that would have then failed, had it existed. Something had been lost, yet the object of this loss could not be defined.

In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, Enzo Traverso writes that following the fall of communism the left could not find anything to transcend the melancholy born from defeat. Yet he suggests that, “[l]eft melancholy does not necessarily mean nostalgia for real socialism” or any other failed political ‘cause’.”³ Instead he proposes that “[r]ather than a regime or an ideology, the lost object can be the struggle for emancipation as a historical experience. And that experience deserves recollection in spite of its fragile, precarious, and ephemeral duration.”⁴ In this perspective, melancholy means memory and attentiveness to the potentialities of the past. We need to demonstrate our fidelity to the emancipatory promises of past revolutionary situations, not to their unintended consequences, Traverso argues.

For Traverso, left melancholy has “always focused on the *vanquished*” and “perceived the tragedies and the lost battles of the past as a burden and a debt, which are also a promise of redemption.”⁵ In Traverso’s project, images are considered to be as important as concepts “in molding and expressing the culture of the left,” its sense of defeat and its potential redemption.⁶ After all, when a revolutionary event fails, a scattered archive of images of gestures, faces, situations, and movements remains. Images prove that the event took place. They are reminders of a failed past but also a potentially different future. Can

images of resilient crowds facing down authoritarian forces and resistant actions help us recollect that lost object of the struggle for emancipation that Traverso talks about? Do images congeal the fragile, precarious, and ephemeral experience of the process of emancipation? While the present consequences of the contemporary wave of uprisings seem to culminate in a counter-revolution, can the global gallery of iconic images help us recollect that of the momentary experience of emancipation?

In this chapter, I discuss the political and social composition of the 2010–2013 cycle of contention by focusing on the iconic images of the period that came to represent this recent global movement against neoliberal capitalist world order. I specifically dwell on two instances of this cycle of contention, namely, the so-called “Tahrir moment” in Egypt in 2011 and that of the Gezi uprising in Turkey in 2013 and discuss the ways in which the crowd, the main actor of these events, has been captured in iconic photographic images. My aim, however, is not to try to turn the vast mass of images into a categorized and systemized archive. Neither do I look for unnoticed details in these iconic images that would bring about the truth of the uprisings, such as preferred in a semiotic reading. I focus on iconic images that testify to the re-emergence of the crowd in contemporary politics and discuss the ways in which two points of view, namely the drone and street-level perspectives, portray the crowd. These two perspectives, I contend, resonate with certain characteristics of these uprisings. The drone-perspective images representing the crowd occupying the square, I argue, give us the people as a political subject, while the images taken from the street perspective picturing the revolutionary everyday of the occupation, from clashing with the police to cleaning up the square, provide us with a glimpse of what the crowd does and constructs the people as a social relation. Eventually, I argue that the relation between these two perspectives points to one of the main challenges these movements faced: the tension between what has been deemed the political and the social. I suggest that it is in between these two complementary perspectives that not only the visual language, but also the socio-political composition of the uprisings can be rethought. It is where we may find the political premises and emancipatory promises of that revolutionary tide now past and possibly imagine a different future.

Images of Uprisings and the Return of the Crowd

The cycle of contention was set in motion by a single act, when Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor assaulted by the local police, set himself on fire in late December 2010. Or was it initiated when amateur video footage of the angry crowd gathering in front of the government ministry went viral? The self-immolation act was over, yet the anger of the gathered crowd was recorded. Images of various types and quality, amateur and professional, live or uploaded on social media, moving or still, were crucial for these uprisings to “go globally viral.”

On January 25, 2011, following an action call to protest the police violence under the reign of President Hosni Mubarak, thousands of Egyptians from all walks of life met in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Tahrir (Arabic for liberation), the main square of the city, has a long history of dissent and at the time was going through a so-called urban transformation. The number of protesters grew as a response to excessive police brutality. By January 28, Tahrir square was occupied by thousands of people, initiating what is now called the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. The occupation of the square with makeshift tents lasted 18 days until the resignation of Mubarak. During those days Tahrir Square became an occupied city within Cairo, including its own entry points run by volunteers, a

kindergarten, pharmacies and clinics, library, and kitchens. When Mubarak declared that he had stepped down, protesters started cleaning up the square and went home. The revolution was now complete, the people thought.

On May 27, 2013, construction machines started working in Gezi Park, the only green space in the middle of the cultural, social, and political centre of Istanbul, Taksim. A few activists stopped the machines and spent the night in the park. In the morning they sent out an urgent call to stop the so-called urban development plans, which included the construction of a new shopping mall on the grounds of the park. In the following days, the number of protesters grew in response to police violence. On June 1, the crowd occupied the Taksim Square and Gezi Park. The so-called Taksim Commune lasted until the occupation was violently evicted by security forces on June 15. Just like its counterpart in Tahrir, the Taksim occupation had a library, a kindergarten, kitchens, and clinics, and the use of money was abolished in and around the park. Once the occupation was over, people went back to their neighborhoods and gathered in assemblies for months.

The occupied Tahrir was broadcast live 24/7 on international TV channels and so was Gezi. Protesters filmed every second of the revolutionary situation with their mobile phones, to the extent that they sometimes even recorded their own death, such as one protester in Syria did, as Rabié Mroué states.⁷ Any sort of footage was immediately archived on the spot by database collectives such as *Mosireen* in Tahrir or *Videooccupy* in Gezi.⁸ A massive amount of personal and public visual material created a kind of image spam, coming from different sources. These images constructed the revolutionary events as visual phenomena.⁹

Michael Löwy argues that by the end of the nineteenth century the idea of the revolution became widespread thanks to images, specifically photographic ones. He argues that revolution, then, was a matter of image and imagery before it became a conceptual matter.¹⁰ The wave of uprisings, the first revolutionary events of the twenty-first century, indicated multiple crises in the ways in which such events can be represented conceptually as well as visually. How can we represent these events visually when there are neither leaders nor organizations, or when there is no single privileged moment that would represent the movement? How are we to define them? Are they revolts, uprisings, revolutions, or perhaps “refo-lutions” focused on the reformation of institutions?¹¹

Judith Butler suggests that “[i]f an event comes to be called an uprising rather than a revolution, that is because, however valiant it was, the bid for emancipation failed in the end.”¹² But one cannot read that failure when the event is in process, when it unravels itself. Images can perhaps capture those moments of defeat and victorious instances of a revolution, but a revolutionary process is open to all possibilities. Ariella Azoulay argues that the universal discourse of revolution constructed in the eighteenth century understands “the revolution as a limited event, a temporary matter, an interim phase, a transition on the way to establishing a new regime.”¹³ Against such an understanding, she proposes that we view revolution as a civil language, different and separate from and against that of the sovereign power. Like any language, it consists of a set of signs, some bearing their own meaning, while that of others is derived from the syntax of phrases in which they are articulated. The language of revolution, then, comprises a vocabulary of gestures, a grammar, rules, and the possibilities of improvisation. Azoulay contends, since it is a language of gestures, photographs are its writing paper. She lists “several statements which, used repeatedly, have created a new local idiom”: “dumpsters lying upside down in the street ... hands raised in the victory sign, singing with strangers, throwing stones, graffiti on flags, uprooting existing power symbols, climbing on top of

tall buildings or cars ... the civilian use of military strategies, setting fire, damaging portraits of rulers, giving testimony about the acts of the governing power and so on.”¹⁴ For Azoulay, these gestures, combined with others, are articulated in a civil syntax. I look for remnants of such civil syntax of the crowd in contemporary uprisings.

There is now a recent and growing literature on the notion of the crowd and its role in recent uprisings as the main agent. Joshua Clover argues that the twenty-first century is and will be the “new era of uprisings” and the crowd is back again after decades of organized and systemic collective actions such as the strike.¹⁵ The phenomenon of the crowd, that monstrous, uncontrollable desiring figure of the people, the fearful beast of the nineteenth century, is back with a vengeance, and has become one of the main global political actors of our time. Relying on the experience of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and other square occupations and historical examples such as the Paris Commune, Jodi Dean too defines the crowd as the fundamental unit of contemporary politics.¹⁶ Even though the crowd “cuts out an opening by breaking through the limits bounding permitted experience” it does not represent an alternative in itself.¹⁷ This is why, for the crowd to become the people, representation is necessary and that representation, Dean argues, has to be faithful to “the blessed moment” of the discharge.¹⁸ Judith Butler, on the other hand, focuses on the notion of assembly from Tahrir Square to OWS and Gezi, and considers it a politically performative act, delivering “a bodily demand for a more liveable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.”¹⁹ Like Dean, Butler also questions the issue of the representation of the crowd and asks whether the uttering of “we, the people” would be a reliable political performative, given that some people will always be missing in the assembly, in its presence. While Dean looks for possibilities of constructing a political form that would not only represent but also turn the crowd into a political subject—that is, in her words, the party—Butler questions the possibility of that crowd to ever become the subject of politics, that is, “the people.” Yet both Butler and Dean yearn for a future politics of the crowd and explore possible forms of not only gathering but also governing. And that search for a form is both a political and aesthetic matter.

The crowd in both Tahrir and Taksim was also in search of a political and aesthetic form to represent itself. Their experiments with different forms of direct democracy may be read as a yearning for alternative forms of self-representation. Similarly, protesters rejected the mainstream media and conventional forms of visualization, and used their phones, uploaded images on social media, and challenged the limits of aesthetics of representation. In spite of such vivid experiments with limits and forms of representation, none of the events yielded a revolution in image production. Alissa Lebow’s documentary *Filming Revolution*, a project which initially attempted to understand whether the revolution in Egypt created an aesthetic rupture in filmmaking, is in accordance with such an argument. Lebow contends that since the revolution in Egypt is neither over, nor can it be declared successful in radically reorganizing the ruling regime, there has been no opportunity to craft a new approach to cinema in line with the new reigning ideology.²⁰ In the absence of such aesthetic rupture to narrate the revolutionary struggle, iconic images gain more prominence. In the words of Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, iconic photographs concentrate and direct emotions as they “provide dramatic enactment of specific positionings, postures, and gestures that communicate emotional reactions instantly.”²¹ Such images also provoke critical thought, especially if the event they represent is now in the past.

In what follows, I analyse iconic images of the crowd taken in Tahrir and Taksim squares, not only for what they represent, but also, and more importantly, how they represent it. In other words, I read these images as a way to follow the footsteps of the

search for a political and aesthetic form. I identify two modes of framing the crowd photographically.²² The first mode is to capture the event from a bird's-eye perspective, usually taken by a drone. These are the most familiar images announcing to the world that a massive crowd gathered in central squares in Cairo and Istanbul. The other best-known type of image of the crowd is that taken from street-level, which captures the crowd in action. These images represented “the people” as they clashed with security forces, cooked, or sung together in the open air, cleaned, read, or just stood. The iconic quality of such images stems not only from a feeling of a common culture of collective action, but also because these drone- and street-level perspectives succeed in capturing the novelty of the socio-political composition of the cycle of contention, involving aspects such as spontaneity, horizontality, anonymity, and the absence of political leaders or organizations to represent the event both discursively and visually. The drone images’ bird’s-eye view, for example, prevents us from perceiving symbols of identity referring to gender, race, or ethnicity. There is no hierarchy between the protesters, but only a crowd of spontaneous differences. As for street-level images, they present to us the “not-so-revolutionary” acts of the crowd during moments of daily organization, acts that sustained the everyday life of the occupation. These images show instances of working together in solidarity, organizing horizontally, and acting out collectively. By doing so, they capture the spirit of this revolutionary tide, that of autonomously organizing the everyday.

The Drone Perspective and the People as a Political Subject

In *Cairo: Images of Transition*, Mikala Hyldig Dal provides an image list of a Google search for the keyword “Tahrir,” which she conducted on January 1, 2013. This image list comprises almost only photographs taken from a bird’s-eye perspective of Tahrir



Fig. 8.1 Snapshot from Mikala Hyldig Dal’s image list of a Google search for the keyword “Tahrir,” which she conducted on January 1, 2013.
(Courtesy of Mikala Hyldig Dal)

Square. Dal contends that “the bird’s-eye view of a roaring square, joined in collective action against an oppressive regime, has inscribed itself into the global iconography of revolution.”²³ Her insight proved to be correct as the images representing all of the subsequent square occupations—such as Puerta del Sol in Spain, Syntagma in Greece, and Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain, as well as Gezi Park and Taksim Square—from such an aerial perspective became iconic. Most of these aerial images were taken by drones, as revealed by their curved corners. Initially a military surveillance technique, the use of drone images migrated to recording and reporting on contemporary protests, used by protesters and the state alike. A new surveillance technology, ironically, produced iconic images of the new wave of uprisings.

Mark R. Westmoreland, however, is critical of drone images because their “observational stance imagines an aerial perspective, removed from and incompatible with the bustle of street politics.”²⁴ Furthermore, he associates the distance that drone images enforce on the viewer with that of state surveillance techniques and calls them “sanitized images of protest” in contrast with “images made by protesters” and argues that the latter provides “a very different kind of revolutionary iconography.”²⁵ However, this statement, quite simply, understands drone images as products of policing and surveillance in terms of their production, dissemination, and consumption. Yet drone cameras, as Fred Dalmasso asserts, “have been used in Turkey not only to capture images in a desire to present as objective a view as possible, but also to plan the insurgents’ next move as you would plan a military campaign.”²⁶ Hence, drone images were produced and used, for example, in blogs and pamphlets by activists as an act of self-representation. Second, Westmoreland argues that aerial images of occupations entail an “observational stance” since the images are made from a “safe distance,” and the position of the photographer renders them “invisible, disembodied and politically disengaged.”²⁷ Even though for most drone images taken by protesters the camera holder is positioned within the occupation, Westmoreland’s argument about “distance” is quite important. Yet I would like to focus not on the distance of the photographers but on the distance of the viewing point that the aerial perspective brings forth.

Drone images seem to present the scene of the uprising as an objective fact, leaving no room for a subjective stance. This is why authors such as Westmoreland and Dalmasso contrast drone images with “militant images” taken from within the occupations by protesters themselves. Westmoreland calls these militant images “visceral” as opposed to the omnipotent and almost transcendental perspective of aerial images.²⁸ Yet the “omniscient” position will also mean that the viewer critically distances herself from the event. As Dalmasso suggests, “[e]ncountering the event from a perspective that belongs usually to that of the repressive system, viewers are placed in a position they cannot actually occupy without questioning it.”²⁹ Accordingly, he contends that drone images force the viewer “to put things in perspective and to make sense of the event for themselves.”³⁰

Let us try and make sense of drone images so as to understand the ways in which such a perspective relates to the political composition of the event and how such a perspective represents the crowd as its main subject. What does the crowd, the main subject of these images, do? How is it captured in these images? Looking at photographs of occupied Tahrir or Taksim, one could imagine the crowd chanting the slogan *al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want the overthrow of the regime) in Tahrir or *bu daha başlangıç, mücadeleye devam!* (this is just the beginning, the struggle goes on), which became the mantra of the Gezi uprising. Other than that, it is impossible to imagine what the crowd is actually doing, or whether it is doing anything at all. From such a point of view, the people

appear not to do anything but be present. They just occupy space. The drone image of the people concentrated in the square, seen from such an omnipotent perspective, testifies not so much to numbers, but to appearance. It is the people's materialization, or apparition if you will, captured in the concreteness of an image. Jeffrey C. Alexander argues that "the iconic is about experience, not communication. [Hence] to be iconically conscious is to understand without knowing ... It is to understand by feeling, by contact, by the 'evidence of the senses' rather than the mind."³¹ The sheer presence of this anonymous crowd, seen from a position which cannot be occupied by a protester, makes the viewer experience a sense of participation in something fundamental, the fuller meaning of which eludes our comprehension: People! History! Revolution! Equality! Freedom!

While the revolution was unfolding in Egypt, Alain Badiou passionately wrote that "Once a threshold of determination and courage has been passed, a people can indeed concentrate its existence in one square, one avenue, a few factories, a university ... The whole world will be witness to this courage, and especially to the amazing creations that accompany it. These creations will stand as proof that a people is represented here."³² Seen from the omniscient aerial perspective of the drone image, the crowd appears as "the only ... creators of universal history," as Badiou suggests.³³ As such, the drone image turns the crowd into a collective political subject demanding universal rights of equality and freedom.

This image is a recent contribution to the quasi-universal gallery of revolutionary images, which consists of the iconic moments of past events. There was no single privileged or symbolic moment, neither in Tahrir nor in Taksim, that would drastically change the course of events—think of, for example, the storming of the Bastille, or the storming of the Winter Palace. Or to put it differently, there were many different moments at different phases of the event, yet none of them reigned over others or represented the event as much as the collective form of occupation. The drone perspective constructs the act of occupation as a privileged moment, with no beginning or end.



Fig. 8.2 Taksim, June 9, 2013.
(Photograph by Bak.ma/Alper Şen)

John Berger argues that “[a]n instant photographed, can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself.” He adds, “[w]hen we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.”³⁴ The drone image of the people has such an effect of rearranging the meaning in the imaginary gallery of revolution. It makes us re-imagine the revolutions of 1789, 1848, 1917, or 1968, even though no such event or a vantage point ever existed in such revolutions. For example, Löwy’s edited book *Revolutions* is dedicated to reading the images of past—successful or failed—revolutions (1917, Hungarian Revolution, German Revolution, etc.) through and together with photographic images.³⁵ In this collection, there are hardly any bird’s-eye-view images of a revolutionary situation although taking such a picture was a technical possibility. The image of the people had never been presented in this way; this was a wholly new perspective. Yet, the drone perspective taints the imagery of future revolutionary episodes: from now on, no less than such materialization is enough for a revolutionary situation. The global iconography of revolution has dramatically shifted.

The occupation of the historical spaces of the nation such as Tahrir and Taksim was a performative event, as Butler argues. Yet Butler also reminds us that “this performativity is not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, persistence.”³⁶ Therefore, in order to complement the event, the drone image that represents the crowd as a political subject demanding universal rights needs to be juxtaposed with another iconic image that recollects those gestures and the movement of the crowd.

Street-Level Perspective: The People as a Social Relation

If the drone perspective constructs the crowd as a political subject, then street-level images give us a glimpse of what that subject does, that is, the people acting out together as a collective. The drone perspective captures the ways in which the crowd appears when it rises up, whereas street-level imagery represents what that crowd does when it “settles down” during a revolutionary process. In these images we find “a hybrid interplay between iconic and ephemeral elements.”³⁷ Iconic street-level images have a specific grammar of gestures and can almost be chronologically ordered according to the unfolding of the revolutionary event. Such images can be listed in order of appearance as follows: First, we encounter images that show small groups of people gathering together followed by mass confrontations with security forces (including a man facing a water cannon in a street in Cairo, protesters clashing with security forces over the Nile Bridge, people crossing over the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, people surrounded by clouds of tear gas, and the like). The second round of images consists of the carnivalesque, showing moments of collective celebration and togetherness (such as a piano being played at Taksim Square surrounded by a cheerful crowd, street screenings of Tahrir Cinema where the protesters watch daily videos of the uprising). Then there are those images representing the resolving of established political differences and dichotomies among different social groups (such as a protester holding a Turkish flag, holding hands with a protester carrying a Kurdish party flag, accompanied by another protester waving an ultra-nationalist hand sign; a protester holding the Quran next to another waving the Cross at Tahrir, or the Coptic priests and Muslim sheikhs at Tahrir holding hands; a row of Christians standing in order to keep watch over Muslims bent in prayer at Tahrir; and Friday prayers taking place at Gezi surrounded and protected by Leftists).

Even though these images provide us with snapshots from the daily life of a revolutionary situation, they leave out a crucial dimension of the everyday: the routine,

exhausting, enduring, and cyclical collective labor that supports and sustains the revolutionary event. We may call it the ephemeral everyday life of a revolutionary situation. Badiou suggests that “the people is made up of those who know how to solve the problems that the event imposes on them” and that “[s]olving unsolvable problems without the help of the state” is the destiny of an event.³⁸ Activities such as cooking, cleaning, making tea, sleeping, talking, listening, discussing, caring for the injured or just caring for the one next to you, arranging logistics, taking security turns, and the like were the daily acts that made the occupation survive in both Tahrir and Taksim. However, solving such daily problems at the square is not necessarily related to revolution imagery. Ultimately banal, routine, and sometimes even dull, this form of labour concerning social reproduction is historically tied to a gender regime and related with housework and female labor. It has been held inferior to other forms of human interaction, namely production and political action. Yet, in both Tahrir and Taksim, the organization of life, from food to care giving, intricately related with the private sphere, was acted out in public in the encampments over days and nights.³⁹ These acts not only sustained and supported the revolutionary process, but they were themselves revolutionary activities organizing the everyday, outside state and market relations and discipline. Snapshots of such collective effort are plentiful, but they proved to be ephemeral and easily forgettable. As they were acts attributed to the private realm, they were not deemed revolutionary enough.

Images of people cleaning up the occupied squares proved to be an exception to such negligence. Ironically, the world came to realize that the regime had indeed fallen and the revolution was about to be completed when images of Egyptians cleaning up Tahrir Square began to circulate. Following the resignation of Mubarak, people gathered in the square, as Jessica Winegar recounts, with large black plastic bags brought from home and collected food and drink containers, old newspapers, empty cigarette packages, and other remnants of the tent city.⁴⁰ It was an “earnest and vigorous cleaning” with obviously a symbolic meaning, representing the fall of the regime and the end of occupation, which unfortunately did not come to pass. In this sense, the images did not represent an ordinary social practice anymore, but a political statement being staged. The uprising, these images declared, was successful. “Taking the trash out,” which was a daily activity during the occupation of the square, now signified the image of a revolution succeeded.

Cleaning and garbage collecting was also a daily routine during the Gezi occupation. Many images show protesters gathering all the garbage, obsessively down to the last cigarette, and queuing garbage bags one next to the other at dawn and subsequently transporting them away via a “human chain.” The images of this obsessive daily activity, which is a necessity during an occupation, gave the act a political meaning. These images do not denote an obligatory routine, but connote the purity of the protesters as responsible citizens reclaiming the public sphere politically. It reminds the viewer of these images who the protesters are: an engaged social being, the people.

Butler emphasizes bodily needs—hunger, the need for shelter, medical care, protection from violence, etc.—as crucial to politics. She argues that “we have to not only bring the material urgencies of the body into the square, but make those needs central to the demands of politics.”⁴¹ Even though the iconic images of people “taking the trash out” rendered other ordinary revolutionary acts of people invisible, they inserted the common gestures of the people, which would have otherwise remained imperceptible in the historical iconography of revolution. It was a subtle yet significant shift in the gallery. When the people rise up, these images remind us, they have to clean up the mess in order to create another world.



Fig. 8.3 Cleaning up Gezi Park on June 2, 2013.
(Courtesy of Nar Photos/F. Serra Akcan)

The Political and the Social

I have argued that drone- and street-level perspectives transformed the historical imagery of a revolutionary event by constructing the crowd in occupation as a political subject, as true creators of history, and by presenting the same crowd as a social relation performing ordinary acts that support and sustain the revolutionary moment. Westmoreland finds a contradiction between these two perspectives and argues that “the iconography of anonymity that shows the crowded mass as a single, undifferentiated unit, made from a privileged aerial perspective, becomes largely blind to the social dimension of social movements.”⁴² I, on the contrary, suggest that the two points of view are not contradictory but complementary. The alleged aesthetic and semiotic contradiction between the two perspectives concords with the distance between the realm of politics understood as the formulation of universal demands and that of the realm of the social based on sedimented everyday activities. In such an understanding, there is a hierarchy between demands for equality and freedom and that of the act of taking the trash out. Yet reading the iconic images of Taksim and Tahrir together, as I have above, allows us to see that the political demand for freedom can be read back into the social action of removing garbage.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked, following Traverso, whether iconic images of recent revolutionary events help us to recognise the potential of the struggle for emancipation as a historical experience. The potential of this wave of contention, I believe, is to be found between these two complementary perspectives. The visual and semiotic distance between the two perspectives resonates with what Chantal Mouffe has argued: “The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents. Things could always be otherwise

and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities.”⁴³ In Vertovian film theory, the “in between” of the two images would be called the interval. An interval is a dynamic space between two shots, a passage between two consecutive images, referring not to the distance between the two but to a correlation between images that are distant.⁴⁴ The act of montage shows the relevance between two different images not on the basis of similarity and uniformity but of complexity and difference. An act of montage of the political and the social, of the people as a political subject and the people as a social relation, would produce something beyond this duality and capture the ephemeral, the precarious, the fragile experience of emancipation. The political premises and emancipatory promises of the revolutionary event lie in the tension and relation between the representation of the crowd as “the people” in its monumental presence and that of “the people” as a collective creator of a potentially different life. Together, in montage, these complex difference-in-kind images provide the basis for an aesthetic resilience that is needed for all the actions and points of view that bridge the political to the social.

Notes

- 1 For the predicament of the cycle of movement, see, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London and New York: Verso, 2012); Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London and New York: Verso, 2012); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (New York: Argo-Navis, 2012); Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2012); and Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism* (New York: Zed Books, 2012).
- 2 See Dario Azzellini and Marina Sitrin, *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2014).
- 3 Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 146.
- 4 Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 146.
- 5 Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 23, emphasis in original.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Rabih Mroué, “The Pixelated Revolution,” in *Image(s), Mon Amour. Fabrications*, ed. Rabih Mroué (Madrid: CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2013), 378–393.
- 8 For the image database gathered by the *Mosireen* collective check out <https://858.ma/>. Videooccupy's database can be found at <https://bak.ma/>.
- 9 For the notion of “image spam,” see Hito Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation,” February 25, 2020, www.e-flux.com/journal/32/68260/the-spam-of-the-earth-withdrawal-from-representation/.
- 10 Michael Löwy, *Devrimler*, trans. Uraz Aydın (Istanbul: İletişim, 2019), 11.
- 11 Bayat uses the term “refo-lution” to describe the Tahrir event and its aftermath. He defines the term as the specific type of revolution that aims to push for reforms in, and through, the institutions of existing regimes. See Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
- 12 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 30.
- 13 Ariella Azoulay, “The Language of Revolution—Tidings from the East,” *Critical Inquiry*, accessed August 1, 2019, 2, http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/the_language_of_revolution_azoulay.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).
- 16 Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).
- 17 Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 246.
- 18 Ibid., 247.
- 19 Butler, *Notes Toward*, 25.

- 20 Alisa Lebow, "Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly: www.filmrevolution.org," *Visual Anthropology*, 29, no. 3 (2016): 279.
- 21 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 36.
- 22 One can also identify another group consisting of iconic individual "portraits." Take, for example, the iconic photo of a demonstrator being brutally beaten by security forces in Tahrir Square in December 2011. It is now called "the woman in the blue bra" or sometimes, with belittling and eroticizing undertones, the "blue bra girl." The image was cropped from a video, shot by an anonymous witness, during a demo protesting the rules imposed by the generals on elections held after Mubarak's resignation. The woman wearing an abaya falls down as she tries to run away, and she is eventually caught by the military. She lies in the middle of the street as if she were dead, surrounded by soldiers beating her up with sticks, stomping on her bare chest. As her abaya slips open the blue bra she is wearing is exposed. Soon, enlarged and cropped versions of this image were printed as posters and carried in protests. A graffito appeared on Tahrir Square with the blue bra as an element of a Superwoman costume. Endless stencils of the blue bra found their way to the walls of Cairo. In 2013, on what later became the second day of the Gezi uprising, a photo of a woman refusing to back off while being sprayed with tear-gas at Gezi Park appeared in a newspaper. The woman was wearing a red cotton summer dress, necklace, and a white bag slung over her shoulder. Hence the image deserved to be called the "woman in red." The image was chosen most probably because it was thought to represent the middle-class profile of the protesters, a new generation of activists, feminine dignity, and the violence of the security forces, all in one single image. It soon became the symbol of the uprising. It was embraced by the protesters and reproduced on many different materials from stencils to journal covers.
- 23 Mikala Hyldig Dal, "Meta Image Tahrir: Introduction," in *Cairo: Images of Transition*, ed. Mikala Hyldig Dal (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 16–19.
- 24 Dal, *Cairo*, 250.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Fred Dalmasso "Remote Spectating—Drone Images and the Spectacular Image of Revolt," in *Performing Antagonism* ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Even a drone used by a protester for documenting the events was shot down by the police. For the footage, see "Turkish Police Shot Down our RC Drone during Taksim Gezi Park Protests," June 11, 2013, video, 0:38, <https://vimeo.com/channels/542751/68156381>.
- 27 Westmoreland, "Street Scenes," 250.
- 28 Ibid., 254, 256.
- 29 Dalmasso "Remote Spectating," 219.
- 30 Westmoreland, "Street Scenes," 220.
- 31 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning," *Environment and Planning* 26, no. 5 (October 2008): 782.
- 32 Alain Badiou, "Tunisie, Egypte: quand un vent d'est balaie l'arrogance de l'Occident," accessed August 1, 2019, www.versobooks.com/blogs/394-alain-badiou-tunisie-egypte-quand-un-vent-d-est-balaie-l-arrogance-de-l-occident.
- 33 Alain Badiou, "Tunisie, Egypte."
- 34 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 122.
- 35 Löwy, *Devrimler*.
- 36 Butler, *Notes Toward*, 131.
- 37 Westmoreland, "Street Scenes," 250.
- 38 Badiou, "Tunisie, Egypte."
- 39 See Butler, *Notes Toward*.
- 40 Jessica Winegar, "Taking Out the Trash: Youth Clean Up Egypt After Mubarak," accessed August 1, 2019, www.merip.org/mer/mer259/taking-out-trash.
- 41 Butler, *Notes Toward*, 168.
- 42 Westmoreland, "Street Scenes," 249.
- 43 Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," accessed August 1, 2019, www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html.
- 44 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I. The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 81–82.