

Graffiti, Hegemony, Empty Signifier: Curious Case of #DirenGezi  
Graffiti, Hegemony ve Boş Gösteren: #DirenGezi'nin İlginç Öyküsü

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## **Abstract**

In late May, early June 2013, Turkey experienced a vivid uprising. Antagonizing extremely diverse factions and layers of the society, coercive power triggered the peaceful sit-in demonstrations against the demolition of the only remaining public space around the main square of the metropolis, to develop into a country-wide revolt in the course of days. Throughout the movement, street art and in particular political graffiti were widespread tools to disperse the dissident discourse(s) with which public proved discursive hegemony over the capital. According to Laclau, every relation has a discursive foundation, and hegemonic relations depend on the articulatory practices among actors who bring their demands together and generate an identity to oppose the common adversary. The success of such coalition lies within the discourse and its capability to universally signify the particularities of the actors: existence of an empty signifier. The purpose of this study is to investigate if there is such a signifier which represents all factions of the grassroots movement. Graffiti, as a mass medium, is the base for researching the discursive conditions of the collective action.

**Keywords:** Gezi Park, graffiti, communication, discourse, hegemony, empty signifier, grassroots, occupy, collective action

## **Introduction**

On the 28th of May, 2013, finding out that bulldozers arrived to Gezi Park to cut the trees, just a bunch of activists who promised to guard the park against the demolition took action to stop it. Their peaceful sit-in protest was obstructed when police (henceforth, capital forces) intervened: tear gas! Governmental bodies and their representatives from the top level to the bottom (henceforth, capital discourse) desperately wanted this park to be demolished and the artillery barracks which was annihilated in 1940 to be re-erected. The intolerance of the capital to protest ignited the fire of the most serious uprising in the history of modern Turkey. Images of violent intervention by the capital forces disseminated in social networks rapidly. Throughout days, brutality increased, oppression turned into physical coercion, the capital forces publicly tormented peaceful individuals while capital discourse stimulated and supported the disproportionate use of power.

Prior to the protests to protect Gezi Park, several incidents took place which triggered elevated tension in public. In the course of years, censorship and auto-censorship in media, lack of consultancy to the shareholders in public decisions, alleged social engineering and intervention with lifestyles were several causes of the accumulated fury. For instance, engineers and architects chambers and workers' unions were concerned about the vast projects that will utterly influence the lives of the residents of such metropolis as Istanbul, accusing the capital for not taking into consideration of the experts' opinions and environmental impact reports. Regardless of sympathy, capital discourse was insensitively getting on the nerves of the society. For another instance, issues with female body, the persistent claim of capital discourse on feminine representation and threat to prohibit abortion along with "3 kids" gave rise to strong criticism. Moreover, the continuous interference to what to eat or drink; restrictions on alcohol commerce, language of despise for non-conservatives long prepared the base for protests.

As the time approached towards the end of May 2013, accumulation of anger was inevitable. Culture and history were jeopardised: the historical Emek Movie Theatre was to be demolished in order to build a hotel instead, and the protestors some of whom were elderly actors and actresses, were cruelly repressed. Taksim, as

historically main venue for the celebration of 1<sup>st</sup> of May were not allowed to workers and people. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, two blasts in Reyhanlı, Hatay with a death toll of 50 put the capital to the centre of denunciations owing to the aggressive foreign politics on Syria's intrastate conflict. The tactless declaration of a name for notorious 3<sup>rd</sup> bridge increased the tensions and criticism. Under such circumstances, the only remaining public space around the main square of the city was also in danger.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, biggest clashes happened between the capital forces and people. In 3 days, the protests spread across the country while increased brutality caused death and numerous injuries. The capital continued their warmongering discourse. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, capital forces were withdrawn from Taksim Square and Gezi Park. People started to clean around, strengthen the barricades and build a life. Gezi was occupied by the people. Nevertheless, throughout the country especially in Ankara, unrest remained.

All over the protests, street art as a form of resistance was employed by the insurgents to express their feelings. Stencils, posters, banners and graffiti were the most common ones. Political graffiti amused, informed, criticized, engaged, demanded, warned; absorbed the offense while simultaneously responding to it. What capital discourse<sup>1</sup> employed for otherizing the protesting mass was meticulously internalized by the dissident discourse<sup>2</sup>. For example, what the main voice of the capital utilized to characterise the protestors as *çapulcu* (looter) was inured as such: anyone who opposed the capital discourse became a *çapulcu*.

The purpose of this study is to examine the conditions of such discourse in the political graffiti considering the concept of hegemony. Opposition to the capital in the streets by mass protests, enduring the fierce coercive power and finally taking over the control of the public sphere from the capital is a hegemonic operation. For such hegemonic relation to come to surface there needs to be discourse(s) to magnetize the collectives and individuals to take part and articulate their interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Gramsci, in his Prison Notebooks, refers to the Soviet Revolution and states that it is a revolution against the "capital". The term "capital discourse" is in reference to Gramsci's statement and will be utilized in this research to describe the statements coming from representatives of governance.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Harper, in his Online Etymology Dictionary, says that using "dissident" in political sense dates back to 1940s when totalitarian regimes were emerging, referring especially to Soviet Union. Dissident discourse will be used to characterize the messages and the language of the protestors.

The practice of articulation, hence, is the condition to form a hegemonic alliance. The discourse of this co-activist alliance is to be explored by employing graffiti as the communication channel to find if there exists an empty signifier. It is an important question, because the concept of hegemony, in Laclau and Mouffe's words, can be utilized to understand the social, because "the notion of the social is conceived as a *discursive space*" (x, italics in original). Additionally, graffiti is a decentralized and democratic tool of communication that is in the reach of any individual. Therefore, to understand the social applying the logics of hegemony to graffiti of an uprising is a significant quest. To do so, I will be investigating the graffiti of Gezi to find around which nodal point the discourse is stabilized and determine an empty signifier to communicate the totality of the struggle. It will help us answer particular questions on how masses unconsciously express themselves in a similar pattern.

Let us, now, start with discussing street art and political graffiti and review the literature to appreciate the significance of graffiti as communication. Afterwards, we will take a detour to hegemony as a concept and discuss its logics and constituents mainly in the light of Laclau and Mouffe's seminal book called *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. While assessing the concept, we will debate over the hegemonic relations, its dimensions and emergence of empty signifier by which the discourse of the articulatory practice unite and vanguard the hegemonic project.

## CHAPTER I

### GRAFFITI AS COMMUNICATION

#### A. Graffiti as a form of communication

Plural of graffito, graffiti is a type of street art and a communication technique where “stone” is the medium. As well as being a tactic to defend oneself and the front against the brutality of the capital forces, stone is the surface for lettering messages of dissidents to reach public. As Peteet says, the urban environment provides built-in and handy armament for defence, offense and discourse (139).

Even though mass communication within contemporary context is predominantly associated with electronic media, “the idea of mass communication should not be limited to major high technology and professionalism” (Chaffee 3). Considering the audience, such a medium that is all-inclusive should be entitled as mass communication (3). Depending on the political situation and concurrent conditions, context of communication varies. For example, Peteet studied graffiti in the West Bank during late 80s and early 90s where graffiti was a prevalent means of information diffusion and resistance (139). She paid attention to the cultural production aspect of the graffiti of the *Intifada*, whereas Olberg studied the messages conveyed via graffiti on the notorious West Bank Wall (Political Graffiti on the West Bank Wall in Israel/Palestine 8). When, in a lecture, we were asked to think about the first mass communication medium, the outcome of the discussion was “book” considering its history and ability to store and diffuse sizeable information. Later on, while researching graffiti, the ancient wall inscriptions and cave art were recalled in my mind. I brought up the question again on a private message to the lecturer: “what would you say if I name the first medium of mass communication as graffiti?” His answer was about the circulation of the information. With a book, it is possible to circulate information and reach masses; though graffiti is fixed and non-distributable. It is indeed logical. However, with the help of such cave inscriptions from ancient times reaching modern era, humanity obtained large historical information. They have allowed us fill the gaps within history, because there was no written record but drawn figures! Historically, we have the information that the first inscriptions which

qualify as visually skilful dates back Cro-Magnon<sup>3</sup> era (Gauthier 4)! With these in mind, we might need to reconsider the definition we assign to mass communication.

In his extensive research on visual ethnography of graffiti in Montréal, Gauthier expresses that despite the fact that graffiti has been used for diffusing political messages for centuries, the first use of them as demonstration of opposition is in French Revolution. Same era, he adds, coincides with the fact that the middle class saw graffiti as hazardous, because the revolutionaries used it to express their resentment towards governance. Furthermore, decentralized move of street art production opposed the bourgeois perspective of “cleanliness, sanitation and control over the public arena” (7). It is also claimed that World War II affected the urban outlook. Political graffiti and signature graffiti were widespread in the urban areas of western towns (8).

Street art in general and graffiti in particular are claimed to be understudied (Chaffee 3; Waldner ve Dobratz 377; Gauthier 3). Furthermore, autographed street art are usually the centre of attention of such studies (Olberg 15). Yet, street art and its documentation provide a record of the social and are very useful to understand the social formation, cultural production and identification of particular groups, grassroots perspectives, contentious participation and many more.

Street art has various forms and is a strong form of grassroots communication. Those forms include posters, wall paintings, graffiti and murals (Chaffee 4). Street art is utilized for expressing individual and/or community identity, “sociopolitical struggle” (Chaffee 4), resistance to authority (Olberg 17) and sometimes for oppressing the weak (Rodriguez ve Clair 4). Chaffee asserts that street art gives voice to the individual. It allows factions of the society that are not able to give statements and be heard about the social issues that reflect the popular testimony. It brings about a form of production in which the producer has the command over the message (4). In certain contexts, graffiti are “the vehicle or agent of power” (Peteet 140). For example, in one of the earliest studies of street art, Ley and Cybriwski analyse the function of graffiti as territorial markers with which the dominated and

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<sup>3</sup> Location of earliest cave marks is stated by Gauthier in the same paragraph as Lascaux cave in Southwest France. They are claimed to be 17.000 years old.

contested districts were indicated (491). Besides, it stimulates the social for unification around the common objective (Olberg 17). “Clichés, slogans and symbols –the substance of political rhetoric- help mobilize people” (Chaffee 4).

As a mass medium street art has certain characteristics. Let us explore those characteristic by following the lead of Chaffee:

“First, the process is *primarily collective*.” (8, italics in original)

It is further asserted that factions of society utilize street art as an information diffusion method to pinpoint social issues, to probe rules, give statements and propose replacements (Chaffee 8). The decentralized aspect of street art enables individuals to act separately but concomitantly. People gathering around the same cause and common objective can establish a discursive partnership, despite being unaware of each other. During Gezi uprisings, for instance, the voluntary street art had led the way to enunciate the cause to protect the park and endure the violence, even though there were huge differences between groups and individuals.

“A second ... it is a *partisan, nonneutral politicized medium*.” (Chaffee 8)

There is no previous consensus on how to perform street art, nor is there a predetermined necessity for political correctness. It can be asserted that neutrality is not an easy quality for an individual to hold, but it is an institutional virtue. Neutrality requires non-involvement whereas the virtue of street art’s is concealed within its push to get involved. Chaffee claims that street art urges antagonism by critique, observation and remarking (8).

“A third ... is its *competitive, nonmonopolistic, democratic* character.” (Chaffee 8)

Spray paint can be found in hardware stores and walls, stones, pavements and roads are spread to the urban. Anyone who desires to spread their perspective is able to utilize such easily accessible tools. Chaffee adds that it might be prohibited or just tolerated; it is a place for “minority and marginal groups” who introduces diversity to the messages conveyed through such medium.

“Fourth, street art is characterized by *direct expressive thought*, using an economy of words and ideas, and rhetorically simple discourse.” (Chaffee 8)

There is no need for excess anyway in an “on the run graffito”. Slogans, in general, tend to be simple yet comprehensive. Although Chaffee says that “seldom are the messages ambiguous or obscure”, Olberg claims ambiguity as a characteristic of messages in the graffiti of “the wall of shame”. It is a point to mark for me, because Olberg is the person who, in the first place, suggested to me to get Chaffee’s seminal book. He does not substantiate his claim of ambiguity in that paragraph or nearby, and when I check the graffiti from the wall it seems that majority are fairly simple expressions. When I investigate through the graffiti of Gezi, ambiguity is a way to employ humour. On the other hand, they are still rhetorically simple.

“Fifth, street art is a *highly adaptable medium*; its form changes to meet the conditions of the political system.” (Chaffee 9)

Using the word “twilight” for the era of Pinochet, Chaffee tells us that even though murals (due to the fact that they take time to paint) vanished; leaflets and graffiti were the main channels of communication (9, note in brackets by the researcher). Peteet notes that, in Israel, property owners had to paint over the graffiti if there existed one on their wall; otherwise they were fined for about \$350 (1996, 143). This situation also show how highly adaptable graffiti is, because it is further asserted that Palestinian people were mobilized by their leadership to face the occupying forces! It was a political act to control the privately owned walls and a strategy to trigger resistance.

Such characteristics of street art reveal themselves when motivating factors spark the groups or individuals for collective action. As a base for this theoretical review of street art, Chaffee provides elaborate categories on what motivates people to perform street art. The suggested categories, including individual, collective and governmental perspectives, vary from the catharsis explanation to the street culture; the cultural, ethnic-linguistic identity explanation to marginalized groups; from impacting the dominant media to grassroots collective explanation; from political inspiration to political intimidation (10-20). I will be assessing the relevant

motivations for Gezi in the analysis. Now, let us distinguish street art from its subforms. As we explore definitions and discussions of political graffiti, let us frame the focal point of this study.

Graffiti in the political context (henceforth political graffiti) that are spray painted, sketched or inscribed convey the messages and perspectives upon the socio-political disputes (Gauthier 21). Waldner and Dobratz note that covering “ideas and values” political graffiti is exercised for an impact on “public opinion, policy or government decision making” (378). It is further argued that political graffiti contest the hegemonic order (Gauthier 7; Waldner ve Dobratz 378; Rodriguez ve Clair 3). Significance of political graffiti reveals when an authoritarian government diminish public sphere (Chaffee 4). As capital forces urge the public to tighten their usual space and prove hegemony over any public decision that influences the lifestyle of individuals dramatically, political graffiti emerge against such domination. In such cases, the act of graffiti writing is considered to be political, as well. Cited in Waldner and Dobratz, Lewisohn is noted as questioning whether the “motive or the act itself that is important”. Further, they examine the perspective for seeing the relationship of art and politics (379). Due to the fact that the capital discourse is confronted, the act becomes political. Moreover, it is said that “a ritual and symbolic act against a capitalistic value system” takes place when graffiti is performed (Waldner ve Dobratz 380). In a moment of mobilization, it is inherently political to see youth spray painting the walls. For instance, during Gezi, “no wall to be left empty” was one of the graffiti I came across. Such graffiti calls for action: the act of challenging the system. Likewise, another graffiti says “I have no more slogans to write!” Is it important to write a message that informs? Or warns? Or criticizes? Political graffiti become a hegemonic relation where the walls are at the disposal of the people. Individuals, while not being able to dominate any kind of institutional media –excluding social media that is valid for the last 10 years-, the media logic serves the need of the public in the graffiti case. Moreover, graffiti writing turns into a ritual and embody a symbol of resistance. Thus, the act itself becomes political, since not only the message but also the medium becomes the message<sup>4</sup>. Proving

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<sup>4</sup> See McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT press, 1994.

hegemony happens by domination in the discursive field, therefore the message, and therefore the medium.

It is also said that location of the graffiti plays a crucial role in understanding the context of the political act (Waldner ve Dobratz 379). We can add that time is vital, too. Therefore, it can be claimed that space-time is a component of the act of graffiti writing. More than complementing the graffiti, space and time determine the context in which the meaning is encoded.

With little or no consideration of aestheticism, political graffiti are quickly produced and secretively positioned (Chaffee 7). Although the process is mostly anonymous and disguised, the outcome is expected to be utterly obvious and noticeable (Olberg 27), so that the graffiti serve the purpose of attracting an audience. It is important to note here that writing graffiti presupposes an audience. Digging into levels of readership, Peteet suggest that, in Palestine for example, reading as well as writing is a collective act. Even though reading in the first place is something to do alone, it is stated that people talk about graffiti of the Intifada at home and in close circles. There might be variety of interpretations, though the readership depends on experience. She further tells that whenever she brought up the topic to a local whether they read graffiti or not, there were no need for follow up questions, as they were directly expressing their thoughts. She notes, additionally, that locals stick to the graffiti to be informed about the resistance and points out the resemblance to a newspaper (Peteet 151). In such cases of large conflict like occupation, reading graffiti also becomes a social practice. On the other hand, Chaffee suggests an expected decrease in graffiti if there is a wide consensus and reduced pressure in society and among political actors; a rise in opposite. He points out the influence of sociopolitical conditions as a key factor for street art (162).

It is the time to distinguish anonymous graffiti and signature graffiti. Calling it “anonymous political visual speech situations” Gautier states that while mixing visual and written elements, the practice of anonymous graffiti is a form to discuss “cultural identity and nation-state building” without letting anyone identify the writer. For his research in Montréal, he says that anonymous graffiti has been the most common form of street art since 1960s. Signature graffiti, however, includes a

name, a nickname or an acronym (22). For another instance, it is declared that each graffiti in the West Bank has a signature of a particular resistance group such as PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Hamas or Fatah (Peteet 157). The focus of this research about the graffiti of Gezi will be exclusively of anonymous political graffiti.

Let us summarize what we have been discussing in this chapter so far. The debate whether graffiti is a mode of mass communication was our initial question. It is mentioned that, from the early ages, there are traces of inscriptions on stones which have functioned as information storage media. Therefore, historically, wall has been the first medium. The wall inscriptions back then and evolution of it to graffiti in the contemporary era happens to follow the same lead: street art. The fact that they come from the grassroots and speak to multiple audiences strengthens the assertion that street art (or graffiti in particular) should be viewed as mass medium. Chaffee, as quoted above, lists the qualities of street art as follows: Collective, politicized, democratic, direct and adaptable. Due to such characteristics, it reflects the social formation in its specificity. Thus, it is worth to try to analyse the social formation by investigating graffiti.

This study, not implying that it understands the social formation as such, endeavours to explore graffiti with respect to logics and concepts bounded by discourse theory. If, as Laclau and Mouffe claims, everything happen within discourse, that “social actors occupy differential positions within discourses that constitute the social fabric” (xiii) and if language is the ground for every social practice, then political graffiti can be analysed with such logics. The central category of those logics in this research is the concept of hegemony.

### **B. Graffiti, discourse and hegemony**

In one paragraph of “The Graffiti of the Intifada” Peteet succinctly elaborate the features of graffiti in the West Bank. Her remarks overarch the whole literature of dissident graffiti writing. Resemblances with that of Gezi are unlikely to neglect. I have no better words, therefore I quote:

“As cultural artifacts, graffiti were a critical component of a complex and diffuse attempt to overthrow hierarchy; they were Palestinian voices, archival and interventionist. They were not monolithic voices for sure, but polysemic ones that acted to record history and to form and transform relationships. While they represented they also intervened. For Palestinians as a readership, graffiti simultaneously affirmed community and resistance, debated tradition, envisioned competing futures, indexed historical events and processes, and inscribed memory. They provided political commentary as well as issuing directives both for confronting occupation and transforming oneself in the process. They recorded events and commemorated martyrdom.” (Peteeet 140-141)

Under such circumstances in which graffiti serve as the prominent medium for sustaining the resistance, narration of reality emerges from the streets themselves where myths are genuine life experiences and actuality is in the borderlands amid the real and the fictive. One step ahead, a bullet in the head; one step behind, lucky for the body, bad for the mind. Such rush in such derangement blurs the line between the real and the game, like in a fantasy role play. The excess leads the mind to push the limits of anything that is regular, where routine is back in the days, far away. Expression of such excess reflects the contingent relations amongst such detriment. Expedition for catharsis, excursion for inspiration, cause for identity and quest for hegemony adhere to the discourse by which the dissidents enunciate their reality. They simply think loudly.

But, what is the relationship between thought and reality? Or, perhaps we should first consider the reality as such. Which one reflects the reality? Hero or terrorist? Looter or activist? Veteran or wounded? Martyr or corpse? If the precondition of “the social” is language that which reality is constructed within, it is indeed logical to claim that society operates within discourse. Laclau and Mouffe state that when the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy is subverted, so is the thought/reality binary. Overthrowing those expands the space for the analysis of the social (110). As a grassroots communication medium, thus, graffiti become an outstanding source from which data to investigate the social can be extracted. For example, Chaffee says

opinions are structured by discourses and images in graffiti. He further asserts that whoever is capable of commanding “political clichés” sustains the superiority (4). As the distinction between thought and reality converges to zero, thinking loudly determines the field of discursivity within which the discourse is formed. In other words, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, “any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre.” (112). Thus, the query of this research is to locate this very centre where various discourses within the graffiti of Gezi intersected and represented the whole hegemonic project: the empty signifier.

In the next chapter, there will be an intellectual excursion to understand the concept of hegemony and dig into its constituents. In the subsequent chapter, I will be discussing the methodology and consequently the analysis will take place.

## CHAPTER II

### HEGEMONY AND EMPTY SIGNIFIER

#### A. Hegemony

For the sake of the concept, let us start with an analogy: Hegemony is like wrestling. As Barthes says in *Mythologies*, wrestling is the “spectacle of excess”. That the meaning is always encoded in excessive gestures and face expressions; that what audience expects is the demonstration of feelings which pushes the limits of meaning. Excess generates clarity and therefore intelligibility. Hence the spectacle allows the audience to understand the gradual interchange of superiority where every move of the wrestler is anticipated and necessary.

The gradual interchange of superiority also applies to the realm of hegemony. Here, we speak about a perpetual fight between antagonistic fronts over forming the reality within discursive milieu. The emergence and theorization of the concept begin with Gramsci. In his *Prison Notebooks*, he mentions “cultural hegemony”. As Hoare and Smith notes, Gramsci differentiates the notion from domination, regarding inherent antagonism that is fundamental to hegemony (20).

In their epoch-making book called *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe set off their intellectual journey to re-conceptualize the notion and theorize the ideology of “radical democracy” while conducting thorough critique of previous works on socialism and hegemony. To do so, they mention the concept as “a discursive surface and fundamental nodal point” for Marxism. The claim stems from the proposition that hegemony is categorically more extensive than presumed within the context of classical Marxism. Moreover, they assert that hegemony comprises *a logic of social* (Laclau ve Mouffe 3, italics in original). At this point of discussion, let us compare two definitions of hegemony and then discuss the aspects that they introduce regarding the social.

“Hegemony is a constant struggle against a multitude of resistances to ideological domination, and any balance of forces that it achieves is always precarious, always in need of re-achievement. Hegemony's 'victories' are

never final, and any society will evidence numerous points where subordinate groups have resisted the total domination that is hegemony's aim, and have withheld their consent to the system." (Fiske 32)

Fiske's definition, from his seminal book called *Television Culture*, is a clear-cut, concrete and communicative one. He takes the notion in terms of its rational political aspect (it is necessary to remind that Gramsci mentions "cultural hegemony") and with an intelligible effort he uses the word "victory" within quotation marks. Pointing out the temporality, the objective of hegemonic operation is identified as seeking omnipotence whereas opposition refuses to obey. It is supposed that the society is closed and predetermined. This is an unequivocal and unambiguous definition that complies with contemporary perspective of politics in terms of power/opposition binary in a singular political space and is indeed useful to understand the hegemonic relations. Now is the time to mention Laclau and Mouffe's.

"The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the 'elements' have not crystallized into 'moments'. In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. A fully successful system of differences, which excluded any floating signifier, would not make possible any articulation; the principle of repetition would dominate every practice within this system and there would be nothing to hegemonize. It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices." (Laclau ve Mouffe 134)

One might ask where the definition is. We come across more of a theorization than definition. In their writings, Laclau and Mouffe are utterly abstract, and decoding the language is a process. They expand their imaginary field of conception to an extremity to tackle their assumptions. In comparison to Fiske's, theirs is a broader perspective. Rather than assuming a case of domination/resistance, practice of hegemony is directly connected to practice of articulation incarnating in a discursive field within which elements and moments are dispersed. Definitions of the

terminology used are required, that is clear; I will be explaining in the next section. Let us bring some kind of clarity to this abstract extremity and move forward with an example: imagine an 8-ball pool game table on which the balls are located in the triangle. Game starts when the triangle is removed and balls are free to move. As the white ball is stroke, balls spread on the table and fixation of elements to moments initiate: the first ball you hit to the pocket determines whether you are the stripes or the solids. Now, the antagonism is identified in terms of the pattern of the ball and one needs to make the best of articulation to win the game. One must hit all the balls at their use to pockets and at last the black 8. How the stick is used, the strategy, the cushion, the angle and impulse with the target ball(s) all matter. Balls are the elements that allow players articulate their interests. Game is a practice of hegemony, and in such system, elements have to be free to move so that articulation is made possible. More elements becoming our moments, closer to winning we are. However, not all elements can become moments: For hegemonic operation to conduct there is no chance that all balls are hit at the end of the game; there has to be balls of the opponent remaining on the table.

Contrary to Fiske, social here is open. If we posit that social is a closed universe, then we diminish the realm to which we can apply the concept to comprehend the social as such. As it is claimed to go beyond Gramsci's conception, hegemony offers a foundation to the social logic by extension and identification for analysing the present social issues (Laclau ve Mouffe 3). It is indeed possible to apply the logic of hegemony to everyday social happenings. As Howarth suggests, with the help of establishing equivalent connections among separate elements, hegemony becomes a political relationship by shaping the societal dependencies with which those connections are shaped (2010, 318). To illustrate, we can discuss an example from our principal departure point: Gezi and the discourse of "lifestyle". In Gezi uprisings, various unaffiliated groups along with so-called "apolitical youth" articulated their unsatisfied demands by linking their equivalences one of which was lifestyle. Depending upon the policies that the capital discourse compelled people to abide, a portion of the society felt the existence of coercive power interior to their private sphere, threatening their daily life and habitus. Lifestyle became an equivalent connection among those various groups. With the help of differences articulating

behind the antagonistic frontier and stabilizing within discourse, hegemonic operation dominated the streets. The key relationship here was of the social being open. The symbolic unity of the society (Laclau ve Mouffe 11) subverted the predetermination of political conditions, therefore provided space for an unforeseen antagonistic alliance to prove hegemony.

The stages for hegemony to come up are attributed to the Russian revolution. Referring to Axelrod and Plekhanov, Laclau and Mouffe report that the word was used for characterizing the seizure of the power by working class from the weak Russian middle class who fails to sustain their ordinary duties for liberation in politics. The fact that bourgeois was not able to carry out the task that they were historically assigned to, devised a gap to be filled (49). Again referring to Plekhanov, they point out that the notion fills that gap “which was left vacant by a crisis of what should have been a normal historical development” (48). Since then, the suitable sphere for the concept to be applied has grown along with the “field of contingent articulations” (3).

What was wrong with the concept, then? What was missing? Why did Laclau and Mouffe pay so much thought and attention on reassessment of hegemony on their way to frame their theory of Radical Democracy? Their assertion starts with highlighting the Left being at a turning point. The expansion of field of contemporary social struggles such as women’s movements, minority rights movements, environmentalism and so on provided new spaces for political articulations (1). Even though those new phenomena allow establishing new partnerships and creating new moments, the lack of flexibility and class struggle obsession of Socialism claimed to have obstructed the construction of a pluralist front (2). Thus, with an evolutionary perspective, Revolution<sup>5</sup> was to be criticized. A fixation of such subject as “working class” was to decline whereas contingent articulations between separate actors have grown. A continuous positioning to respond to steadily altering political circumstances was to emerge. These were the conditions of contemporary political world which gave rise to hegemony (138) and its reconsideration: a fundamental concept to savvy the social (7).

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<sup>5</sup> Capital R is emphasized by Laclau and Mouffe, probably to draw attention to the perception of holiness attached to revolution in socialist ideology.

So far in this chapter, I have been summarizing the theoretical evolution of hegemony. As a political practice, hegemony is considered to provide a framework to ponder upon socio-political affairs. Wrestling for superiority in the field of discursivity, it enunciates the formation of alliances among actors of the social. According to Laclau and Mouffe, society is an impossible totality (even the working class cannot be considered as a uniform community [82]) which consequently let it be partially possible. This partiality, as a result, gives space for contingent articulations through which hegemony emerges. Constant repositioning regarding the political circumstances expands the territories where different groups may establish equivalences among their elements articulating towards a symbolic unity.

As we move to next section, I will be putting together the components of hegemony along with logics of discourse. Those analytical modules will help us perceive the phases of hegemonic relations which will be discussed subsequently. There will be examples drawn from Gezi to embody the review. In transition to my methodology and analysis, I will be connecting the graffiti with the discursivity of hegemonic operation in terms of empty signifiers. Now, let us define the components and discuss the logics of hegemony.

### **B. Definitions of Related Notions and Logics of Discourse**

As aforementioned in the previous section, Laclau and Mouffe define hegemony in articulation terms which refers to the joining of different lines of ideology/advocacy/resistance groups. Articulation is claimed to be not a static label that shows the relationship but the practice of making a relationship (93). They call it “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified” (105). It is the term to verbalize the movement and positioning of actors by which they reshape their stance. Perhaps, it is the only verb that is necessary within the theorization of hegemony.

The repositioning and the reshaped identity of the ideological groups accentuate their interest discursively. Induced by the articulatory practice, what the reorganized identity exhibits is called discourse (Laclau ve Mouffe 105). If we add that all politics is about language, it will be a clearer description. The newly positioned

political stance of particular groups is to display an identity, and the redefinition of this new alliance happen within discourse. Therefore, after defining the only verb as articulation, discourse is the first noun under the title hegemony.

Now, we have the verb and the noun. Let us examine the types of nouns: Moments and elements. Like in physics, moment is an object position. It refers to the articulated elements that form the identity. Element, on the other hand, applies to the ones that are unarticulated (Laclau ve Mouffe 105). Elements float within the discursive field, but they are not fixed inside the discursive formation; thus have not yet become moments.

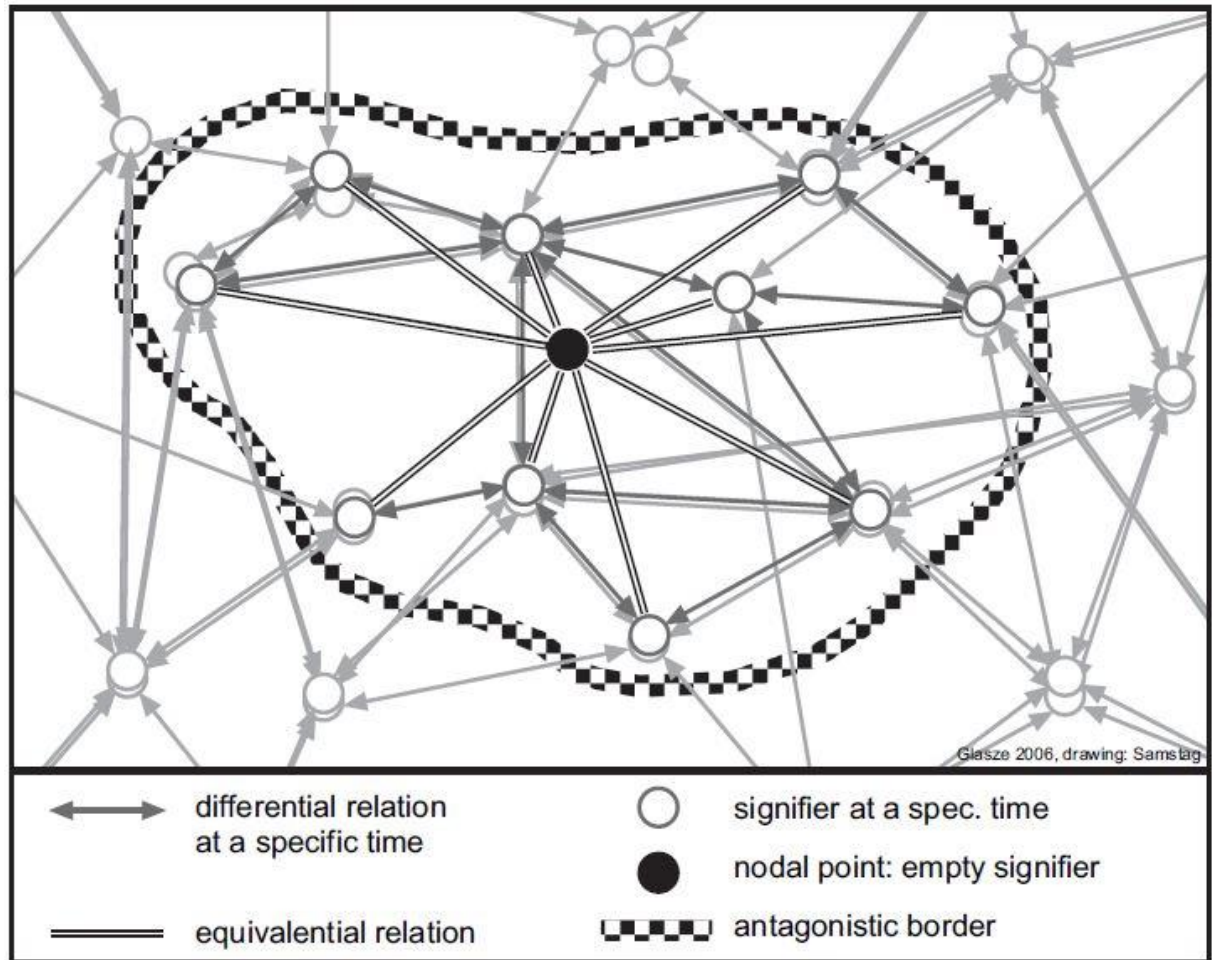
It is important to note that all moments and elements are signifiers that are floating in the field of discursivity. For those elements to exist, subjects of a potential political struggle must pre-exist, so that space for articulation is provided. Subjects, along with their equivalences and differences, in order to for the domination in the discourse, articulate their interests/demands. At this point of discussion, it is also important to understand the logics of equivalence, difference and fantasy.

Logic of equivalence operates as a popularizing tool among actors. It emphasizes similarities and articulation sets up a chain among them. The chain of equivalence within the field of discursivity marks nodal points around which discourse is enabled to function. For example, in Gezi, Anti-Capitalist Muslims and atheists (as well as other religion members, different ethnic groups, feminists, LGBTis and so on) were the links of the same chain where belief and non-belief were equalized to antagonize the capital discourse. The articulation of those separate lines of ideologies, with the expansion of the chain, eventually vanishes the boundaries of their autonomic spaces and become equalized signs behind the same front (Laclau ve Mouffe 182). It is also said that equivalence converges towards a universalized space for politics, whereas difference expands the space which results in a more complex field (130). The logic of difference, as Jeffares suggests, performs in a way that marks the territories of the interior and the exterior, in other words us/them (50). Contrary to establishing equivalental chains, difference speaks of disarticulating them (Howarth 2010, 321). Such disarticulation may occur in an occasion that an element is to be replaced with one another in a repositioning or a dislocation. Considering the social being more

complex than given here, and antagonism being more than a mere clash between two sides, difference grows into a logic of increased possibilities and enhanced political space. Howarth suggests that equivalence and difference are not by default in favour or against discursive hegemony. He also adds that “there is no way of saying that equivalence is normatively preferred over difference, as the critical and normative implications of these logics are strictly contextual and perspectival” (2010, 331, footnote 12).

The process behind hegemony is depended on identification. Identity brings about the subject position, and the process of identification (we will further discuss it in the second phase of hegemonic relation) involves the practice of articulation to take position along with the actors of one side and equivalence and difference logics to manage the articulation. Here comes the Lacanian logic of fantasy. As I cited before from Laclau and Mouffe, society is claimed to be an impossible totality. Nevertheless, this totality has to be apprehended in the minds of the peers. What we previously called “the symbolic unity” is, thus, a fantasy. Cited in Smith, Lacanian perspective is told to see a support, in every political discourse, from a secret fantasmatic construction (73). Due to the fact that no totality can be achieved in reality, the imaginary totality is told to be the attraction (Glasze 661) that pulls the hegemonic identity (which is subject to change) together. This identity, therefore, is a fantasmatic totality sourced from the chain of equivalences and differential positions of the elements within our antagonistic frontier.

Up to this point, we have been analysing the main concepts to understand discourse theory and hegemony in particular. To understand the notions better and for a smooth transition to empty signifiers, let us look at an image from Glasze. In his article about Francophonia and how empty signifiers used throughout the project, he uses a very intelligible image to portray our discussion.



**Figure 1.** *Elements, logics, nodal points and the field of discursivity* (Glasze 662)

Now, we (almost) have all the necessary definitions to move forward to empty signifier. As a transition, I will be evaluating the image while summarizing previously held discussions.

This image is like a cross-section view of a mountain from the top. Signifiers have either equivalential or differential relation to one another. Moreover, one signifier has an equivalential relation with all particular moments; and represents the universality: empty signifier around the nodal point. The nodal point is the summit and signifiers (moments) are holding their differential heights. The area inside the antagonistic border (the land that mountain cover on the ground) is our field of discursivity. It shows only one side of the antagonism; there are contingent others. Communicating the empty signifier –hitting the black ball number 8 to the pocket- is proving hegemony: the summit is reached.

Hegemony, as Howarth suggests, appropriates a speaking tone to examine the socio-political, along with associated concepts (2005, 323). The speaking tone that is implied here consists of, within the antagonistic border, subject(s), identity, discursive formation and a nodal point where we have temporarily stabilized the meaning. This stabilization is transient, because for the meaning to be absolutely fixed is impossible (Laclau ve Mouffe 111). Again, like the analogy of impossible society, “impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations, otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible” (112). Then they add that all discourses, in order to prove superiority in the discursive field, establish a midpoint for seizure of the movement of differences. “We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, nodal points.” (111). Nodal points<sup>6</sup> become the landmarks of signification as they are the ones that dominate the field of discursivity. It is crucial to note here that the discursive struggle among elements to become nodal points happen interior to one antagonistic front to constitute an empty signifier which can represent the whole chain of equivalences within the discursive formation. “The ensemble of differential positions” to which we call discursive formation, all moments are dependent upon one another owing to the articulation of discourses within the whole antagonistic border (106). So, when we look at the image from Glasze, we can see them all. The nodal point, as the intersection of the equivalential chain where the meaning is temporarily fixed, is the representative of the alliance. Elements and moments are dispersed, most of which are stabilized interior to the field of discursivity. Regarding temporality, the differential positions stand by in relation to other elements: at any moment, discourse might need a redefinition and nodal point might shift. Therefore discursive formation might vary throughout the way of hegemonic operation.

A concrete example drawn from Gezi should resolve the whole conception. As a popular uprising, Gezi was the intersection of all individuals and groups that antagonize the capital discourse. Similar to the case of Russian Revolution example we have discussed before, the opposition was unable to carry out their tasks, so that the dissidents marched in the streets taking over their duties. Besides the discursive

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan is told to be using the term “points de capiton”. Anchoring point and quilting point are two other synonyms for the nodal point.

hegemony, the hegemonic operation occupied the streets: Gezi Park and Taksim in general was barricaded and the capital forces were withdrawn. The tree was the reference point of the articulation of the horizontal participation against the capital discourse. It is vital to take a look at the articulated organizations for the common objective: for instance, Taksim Solidarity was a huge co-activist movement made up of workers' unions, engineers, architects and urban planners' chambers, unions of medicine, social and cultural initiatives, feminist movements, political parties, non-governmental organizations, various environmental advocacy groups and so on got together to protect the only remaining green area in the *de facto* main square of the metropolis. When we consider the variety of organizations that set their minds to protect the public sphere (as I mentioned in the introduction, the fight for right to public sphere in Turkey is not limited to Gezi uprisings, but it has a history), the wide chain of equivalences is visible: profession, political view, advocacy channel, ideology, perspective for religion... Particularities converged at the universality of public sphere. Even the presence of at least six different political parties within solidarity articulates the equivalences along with their differences that might crystallize into moments throughout the hegemonic operation. The large field of discursivity, mostly dominated by humour and teasing with the capital discourse, recalls the carnivalesque tradition and hints the utopic freedom where the power of the capital does not exist<sup>7</sup>. Graffiti, as a decentralized mass communication technique, wash the walls of the city. Coming from various parts of society, the fury and the disappointment from the oppressive authority along with lack of ability to self-expression result in the flood of emotions and symbols inscribed on the walls (Chaffee 10). Antagonistic boundaries expand in a way that urges the opponent diminish the discursive possibilities which results in coercion. Resistance becomes the nodal point against the coercive power and reinforces the hegemonic operation.

What I have roughly narrated about Gezi and resistance turning into a nodal point can be reiterated in terms of hegemonic relations as Laclau presents. Now, let us review the phases of hegemony and move to empty signifier.

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<sup>7</sup> Carnival and Madness: Looking at New Social Movements from a Distorted Perspective. [https://www.academia.edu/5114875/Humorous\\_form\\_of\\_protest\\_Disproportionate\\_use\\_of\\_intelligence\\_in\\_Gezi\\_Parks\\_Resistance](https://www.academia.edu/5114875/Humorous_form_of_protest_Disproportionate_use_of_intelligence_in_Gezi_Parks_Resistance)

“Thus we see a first dimension of the hegemonic relation: unevenness of power is constitutive of it.” (Laclau, *Identity and Hegemony* , 54)

Laclau, to explain the first dimension of hegemony, gives the example of Hobbes’ theory. They imagine a chaotic atmosphere –as of nature- and assert the equal possession of power for everyone. Hence, no antagonisms would exist to take part. Moreover, calling it an impossible society due to equal distribution of power, they claim that no society would form. Instead, Leviathan would eventually hold the total power which means no power at all, since there would be no hegemonic operation. However, if there is an uneven distribution of power, then there are contingent antagonisms on which a group might cling to represent their interests and function as an advocate for the welfare of the society that is actually being formed by this hegemonic process.

The first dimension of hegemonic relation applies to all grassroots movements including Gezi. Powerful capital dictating their demands, law enforcements without power of sanction and lack of strength in the side of the opposition constitute the first step of hegemonic operation. As well as unevenness of political power, peaceful protests faced disproportional coercive power. The capital discourse that dominates the media appearance also created unequal perception. All in one big pot prepared the base for the turmoil.

“... a second dimension of the hegemonic relation: there is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity superseded; universality exists only incarnated in –and subverting- some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects.” (Laclau, *Identity and Hegemony* , 56)

Laclau’s conception about particularity/universality is constructed upon displacements of ideas or moments which are capable of representing the chain of equivalences. Here, different type of demands that are connected as equivalences level one another for the political achievement (establishing hegemony) and one of them stands ahead to represent the rest: the particular that becomes universal. This

universal demand is the nodal point has the ability to act against the given capital discourse and represent the plurality.

In his discussions about particularism/universalism, Laclau stresses the two perspectives both of which are claimed to fail to outline them. First, pointing out a straight line that divides the zones of particular and universal; second, relying on reason, describes the zone of universal obvious to mind (Laclau 1996, 23). Then, he refutes both arguments and asserts that there is no gap between them, as the universal is such particular that has superseded the position of the universal due to the conjuncture (Laclau 1996, 26). It is also included that hegemonic universality is the top level for a particularity to represent a totality (Laclau ve Mouffe X).

If we turn back to our point of origin, it becomes clearer. I aforementioned that the equivalences among actors of Gezi uprisings and the discussion was particularly about the constituents of Taksim Solidarity. Even though, type of advocacy for non-governmental organizations, ideology for political parties, profession for unions and chambers were particularly different, public sphere and the trees in the park were the universalizing effect for the whole articulatory practice. Hence, the second dimension of hegemony was satisfied from the first day.

“This shows us a third dimension of the hegemonic relation: it requires the production of empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.” (Laclau, Identity and Hegemony , 57)

What could stand for the whole demands of an impossible society to fulfil its interests? An impossible representation, perhaps? Would there be a singular type of representation to encompass the totality of all articulations?

Laclau puts this discussion at the core of hegemonic relation and asks the question whether it is possible for a specific signifier to stand for something else. Referring to Derrida, he highlights that “meaning” and “knowledge” do not overlap. Hence, (1) the connection between the universal discourse to represent the totality would be looser if there is a wider chain of equivalences, therefore closer to an emptiness, (2) a

total emptiness is not possible due to the fact that there would always be residuals of particulars (Laclau 56). What we should understand from these two givens is that “universal is an empty place” (Laclau 58). There is a negative correlation between the level of universality and the proximity to the particulars which are the articulated equivalences. If we assume a scale from particular to universal and assign zero to maximum respectively, it becomes plausible to say that as we move towards the right, the signifier tends to represent more; therefore it loses its signified(s). While the particular demand dominates the field of discursivity as the symbol of the fullness, it converges towards an impossible representation: A signifier to signify the totality of the equivalential chain, yet a signifier which has lost its particularity.

The main theme of this thesis is that of empty signifier. The hegemony that is proven in the streets, squares and parks of Turkey in June 2013 has reflected its discourse on the walls. I will be investigating the graffiti of Gezi and looking for an empty signifier within dissident discourse. Before we move to the next section for in depth evaluation of empty signifier, there remains the fourth dimension of hegemonic relation.

“Here we have the fourth dimension of ‘hegemony’: the terrain in which hegemony expands is that of the generalization of the relations of representation as condition of the constitution of a social order.” (Laclau, *Identity and Hegemony* , 57)

About society, besides being impossible, Laclau says “a plurality of particularistic groups and demands.” (2000, 55). This is the realm to fill the void in the signifier and propagate the related discourses considering their differential positions within the discourse. Demands are to be articulated, so that the fantasmatic society of our antagonistic imagination comes true. Mediated particular developing into a universal to gain more meanings completes the representation for proving hegemony.

In this chapter up to now, we have looked over the definitions of key terms to understand hegemonic relations and briefly discussed the hegemony proven in Gezi over the capital discourse. To dig more, we are to examine the notion empty signifier

and its political significance. After this section, in the next chapter, I will be talking about the methodology to evaluate graffiti of Gezi in terms of empty signifier.

### **C. Empty Signifier**

As declared in the third dimension of hegemony, empty signifier is the discursive component to successfully conduct the hegemonic project. Throughout articulatory practices, political discourse is the tool to vocalize the identity of subject(s). Regarding particular/universal dichotomy, identity is represented via substitutions, associations etc. among the articulated particularities. According to Howarth, while centralizing metonymy for political discourse, metaphor is also vital for hegemonic practices to establish harmony amid differential positions and identities to prove hegemony. Highlighting similarities and analogical associations between equivalences become the way to partly stabilize the discourse. This process is claimed to be achieved by the production of empty signifier which launches boundaries to mark interior and the exterior and is capable of standing for dissimilar demands and identities (2010, 320).

Referring to Saussure's "sign" (or signification), Laclau paraphrases the baseline for semiotics: "Language is a system of differences, that linguistic identities –values- are purely relational and that, as a result, the totality of language is involved in each single act of signification." (1996, 37). Then, he indicates that for signification as a system to exist, there has to be limits. When we think about signification, it seems that it is an infinite swing of "concepts and sound-images" (Berger 4) that has no limits. However, like any system, Laclau asserts, there needs to be limits that is somehow revealed. Due to the fact that a signifier cannot signify itself, there is no direct way of determining the boundaries of the system. Therefore, the boundaries must disclose as a disturbance. The continuous signification halts by an interruption (37). For such interruption to mark the limit of signification system and preclude the exterior, he points out the empty signifier. Empty signifier is "a signifier without a signified" (36). On the way for the particular to become the universal to represent the whole chain of equivalences and stand for the demands of the antagonistic front that is interior to the field of discursivity, a suppression of differences to put forward equivalences is claimed as the way to manage to draw boundaries around the system

of signification. The nodal point where we partially fixed the meaning is to be remembered: If we get back and look at the image from Glasze (Fig. 1), the signification within the antagonistic boundaries –in other words, field of discursivity- is depended on the intersection of equivalences and differential positioning of other elements in the use of hegemonic project. To illustrate, Laclau brings up the example given by Rosa Luxemburg about an authoritarian regime and its antagonists rallying against the common adversary. Even though the specificities of the struggles vary, the specifics of each of them convert to equivalence and the opposition to the authority remain (40). The multiplicity of discrete struggles emerges in an historical interruption where numerous lines of opposition merge against the repression (41-42). The signifier of this diverse alliance (which comes to surface around the temporal nodal point) develops from what is interior to its constituents, even though on the way to represent the others within the alliance, it will empty itself to signify the total. This “absent fullness” or “absent totality” (42) is connoted by the empty signifier and it is the signifier of the totality as such: filling this absence with meaning –hence, presence of empty signifier- is the practice of hegemony (43).

Let us take a look at Laclau’s example of “order” and discussion about how empty signifier operates. With reference to Thomas Hobbs and his conception of “state of nature” as a *radical disorganization*, the need for order arise.

“Order as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder 'order' is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function.” (44)

It is pretty hard to find such explicit examples in Laclau’s writings. The emphasis here is on absence, the emptiness that is signified by “order”. He adds that “unity, liberation, revolution” are likely to be in the same line. For how it operates and becomes “the one” to signify the whole chain of equivalences, we can find a succinctly written answer in the same book, but in a different article:

“(1) the universal has no content of its own, but is an absent fullness or, rather, the signifier of fullness as such, of the very idea of fullness;

(2) the universal can only emerge out of the particular, because it is only the negation of a particular content that transforms that content in the symbol of a universality transcending it;

(3) since, however, the universal - taken by itself - is an empty signifier, what particular content is going to symbolize the latter is something which cannot be determined either by an analysis of the particular in itself or of the universal. The relation between the two depends on the context of the antagonism and it is, in the strict sense of the term, a hegemonic operation.”  
(Beyond Emancipation 15)

Finally, these three items tidy up what I have been trying to adopt from all literature that digs the emergence of empty signifiers. Let us reiterate it regarding the articulatory logics and previous analogies: Wrestling for hegemony in politics, boundaries of meaning are pushed for the audience to understand the spectacle. Antagonistic fronts are formed and within those fronts elements are spread like the balls dispersed on the pool table. The first ball that is struck determines the sides, hence the equivalences: now the differential positions matter, since they will influence the path of the articulation. The totality of the hegemonic project is defined within the field of discursivity considering the discursive formation that shapes the differential relations between equivalences, differences and their intersection: the nodal point. Out from this formation, a particular moment around the nodal point crystallizes into a vanguard by which the universal is represented. For such a particular to signify the wholeness of the hegemonic project, fantasy (along with the context of the antagonism) plays a role. Society is an impossible totality and the unity of it is symbolic: fantasy is a key logic to construct such reality. Consequently, with all the hegemonic formation in hand, identification of the subject is (partially and temporally) completed. It is the time to discourse to operate via the empty signifier to achieve the demands of the project. We should keep that in mind that the entire spectacle is temporal, therefore articulation is a constant action, differential positions are on the move and audience is alive.

Now is the time to discuss some concrete examples of empty signifiers. In fact, they are very much in our daily lives. The fact that political debate is the top agenda of the contemporary era (in comparison to science, art, literature –excluding sports-politics, in my opinion, is the main topic for casual conversation in Turkey), and the hegemonic operation is the daily duty of politics, we come across empty signifiers more than we realize. The infamous “parallel state” is the example that is nearest to date. Or from historical world politics Holocaust is an empty signifier that has reached billions. From Gezi, we had one of the most fictive ones: the interest lobby<sup>8</sup>! More examples can be derived and the reason for their emergence can be discussed. Hence, more of similar researches might help us understand better the social production of meaning and how reality is constructed within given discourses.

Before closing this chapter, I should note the difference between floating signifier and empty signifier, as they are frequently mixed up and used substitutively. As Jeffares notes, floating signifiers are the equivalents in the chain that are many. For discourse theory to be applied for analysis, it should be considered if the discourse is stable or not so as to note a signifier as floating or empty (58). In this respect, we can claim that any empty signifier was once floating in the field of discursivity.

Many scholars who have so far studied empty signifiers have approached to the phenomenon in terms of an institutionalized and overdetermined way (See Glasze’s “francophonia”, Jeffeares’s “flourishing neighbourhoods”, Wullweber’s “nanotechnology” etc.). However, in a protest where masses gather, we cannot speak of an institution representing the whole crowd. It would be against the very nature of a protest. Especially for Gezi Park protests, popular uprising stems from the lack of institutional opposition representing the demands of the public. In such a decentralized, contentious and individualistic move, it becomes very hard to determine singular signifier to represent the chain of equivalences that brings together the whole diversity to perform the hegemonic operation. As diverse groups get together around a common cause, the discourse of the crowd would also be of such diversity that articulation is a constant action. In each and every graffiti performance, hegemonic articulation is reproduced and the field of discursivity is

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<sup>8</sup> The capital discourse uses such expression to blame foreign powers for backing the unrest by speculating the financial markets.

dominated. The act of writing on the walls with spray paint, in fact, becomes a hegemonic operation. Therefore I will be evaluating the graffiti with respect to that diversity and finding out and analysing potential empty signifiers in the graffiti that reflects the demands by various ways: reversing, distorting, mocking, extending the capital discourse; by humour; by filling signifiers with meaning; by contextualizing; by referencing to historical events and past public experiences and so on.

The departure of this thesis is grounded on Laclau and Mouffe's central problem: "... to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed towards struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination." (153). Considering the abandoned distinction between "discursive and non-discursive practices" I suggest that the social practice in Gezi can be examined by the concept hegemony. To do so, political graffiti of the protests and the occupy movement are to be discussed with respect to "the social production of meaning which is structured under the form of discursive totalities" (107). "The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition" (110) and with such claim, we can merge the idea of a protester spraying their thoughts that symbolizes the reality. As Laclau and Mouffe further assert synonymy, metonymy and metaphor are the principal modalities to construct the reality (110).

To sum up, empty signifier and the quest for finding one as a representative of the whole hegemonic operation are to be the major goal of this empirical study. What, if there is, is the empty signifier of Gezi? Given such question, I am to set out to explore the discursive conditions of graffiti of Gezi regarding empty signifier (thus, floating signifiers). Let us discuss how in the methodology.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

#### A. Methodology

The discussion of applying discourse theory, and in the case of this study, as a sub-concept hegemony and empty signifier has been long criticised. Referring to Keller, Glasze reports that studies on the matter are “often being one-sidedly deductive by applying interpretative approaches, which remain rather vague and not well-defined” (663). I will try to define my approach as clearly as I can, and discuss the limitations in the subsequent section. Nevertheless, having added my approach being interpretive, I am totally open to harsh critics. I would truly appreciate a substantial criticism. Now, let me tell you what I have done to identify the temporal nodal point, hence the empty signifier of such a diverse and vivid grassroots movement.

First of all, the data collection. I set out to reach photographers, collectors and enthusiasts who dared to pay utmost attention to the documentation of the graffiti of Gezi. I searched for archivists who are as sensitive as a documentarist or a researcher, and as inquisitive as a journalist. Because, the context of graffiti is determined by the time and the location, and I need to make sure that they are from the relevant era. One of these two components, the location is less significant for this study, since specific locations are not necessary to analyse the graffiti of an uprising which took place for the claim of public sphere. Due to the fact that all public spaces belong to the people, and people are the subjects of the graffiti, specific locations tend to lose their importance at gathering data for this case. Moreover, the resistance was spread to whole country. So, neither the street, nor the exact spot is significant. On the other hand, without an assurance that the graffiti is from the time interval of late May early June 2013, the analysis would be at stake. Therefore, I decided to find the graffiti in bulk, rather than collecting it from possibly unreliable sources.

Luckily, I found another MA thesis written by Cemre Güneş Şengül named *Resistance on the Walls: A Content Analysis of Graffiti in Turkey* where she compared the content of the graffiti prior to Gezi with the ones during Gezi. I asked her if she could share the data, and she kindly accepted my request. Thanks to her, I

also met Laclau and Mouffe by whom I was able to get this MA thesis done. Furthermore, 3 more graffiti collectors opened their archives to me, so that I gathered a set of over 1000 unique graffiti that is written in the time interval of late May early June 2013. There might be repetitive graffiti inside the set, though they are not the image of the same graffiti, but the same graffiti written in different spots. I think the universal set of data I gathered represents the discursive conditions of the movement.

Secondly, the data selection. Empty signifier being the unit of analysis of this study, there needed to be graffiti with such a signifier that might qualify as an empty signifier in various contexts. In fact, this query fits with the quest for floating signifiers. For example, “freedom”, “order” or “country” might be empty signifiers in relevant contexts, if not now. In fact, for a democratic struggle, they float in the field of discursivity. They might be fixed in the trajectory of the hegemonic operation, because all fixations are partial and temporary. In order to find those signifiers that float in the discursive field of the grassroots movement coded in graffiti, an assessment of the set of graffiti to handpick the material is conducted. The handpicking criteria is vague and mostly based on heuristic procedures, though I will try to substantiate them.

The description and the literature of empty signifier provide knowledge driven intuition to the researcher to handpick the graffiti. As Berger says, to be able to deduce conclusion in an interpretive study, the researcher needs to be “timid enough to draw their inferences” (Media Analysis Techniques 11). On the way to draw such inferences, while trying to be timid within a reasonable academic distance, I attempt to frame the process of identifying such signifiers considering several features: the quality of the vocable, frequency, and patterns of reproduction. Being the most complicated and the hardest part to explain, the heuristic handpicking process starts with determining the quality of the signifiers within a graffiti to see if they might suit the requirements of becoming a floating/empty signifier. So, first, let us start by discussing the quality of words to qualify as a floating and potentially an empty signifier, and as an example let us take “freedom”. In certain contexts, freedom might signify the totality of the chain of equivalences, because the discursive foundation depends on the particular that is absent and demanded by the subject(s).

Different factions of society, organizations and political parties might see the absence of freedom, and regardless of their particularities, they might demand the universal: freedom! Could we replace such a demand with “tear gas” in any political context? In fact, if tear gas or water cannon was to become an empty signifier, then Gezi would be the best example of using such discourse! Because, probably, tear gas and its variations such as “Oh!Biber!”<sup>9</sup> (appendix 165) are the most widely used vocables within the dissident discourse. Or in another example “coward media” (appendix 166) locations such as Taksim, names of capital leaders etc. do not qualify as a floating/empty signifier in any contingent political context. Hence, determining the quality of a signifier depends on its semiotic width that can be decided by knowledge driven intuition, and it is detached from objects, locations, names and their variations. The signifier must be politically relevant to be selected for the analysis. In other words, there should be an overlap between the logic of politics and the construction of reality within the given discourse. Jeffares summarizes what Laclau says for emergence of an empty signifier: “(1) a demand that shares an association through a shared negation with other demands that (2) steps in to be a general equivalent for the chain that then (3) over time severs much (but not all) of its particularity to lead and symbolise the discourse.” (66). Therefore, regarding the logic of politics, there needs to be a *demand* that unifies the equivalences to become an empty signifier.

Secondly, frequency is a variable that will also help us decide which signifiers appear the most among the selected. Each graffito will be treated as a corpus, and repetition of heuristically handpicked graffiti is to be examined in terms of their quantity. The same question above might arise: we just subverted quantity as a picking variable, what has changed? Here, the sequence of the handpicking operation is crucial. Relevance of the signifier in terms of the political logic is prior requisite for the process. In other words, intuitively handpicked graffiti will be sorted considering their frequency in appearance. It will help us see what floating signifier intersects with equivalences and differences, so that it will be a big step forward for

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<sup>9</sup> Oh!Biber! comes from “tear gas” known literally as “pepper gas” in Turkish. So a literal translation would say “Oh!Pepper!”. Internalizing the brutal usage of tear gas and signifying fearlessness among many others, it is a well known graffiti from graffiti of Gezi.

finding where the discourse has stabilized within the network of differential positions where nodal point is located.

Thirdly, patterns of reproduction will also help to deduce the variability in the discourse. The versatile usage of language in graffiti expands the field of contingency to articulate differences. To illustrate, the subject of “çapulcu”<sup>10</sup> was used in various forms, including appropriations in other languages. “Chappuller”, “chapulling”, alternative conjugations and so on provided discursive space for stabilization around a central intersection point that holds to potential to become a nodal point. Patterns of reproduction will be the third aspect to select data from the universal set. In fact, rather than handpicking, it will be more useful to analyse the data.

The method that I come up with might seem limited; I am to discuss the limitations in the next section. Nevertheless, no matter how we handpick or apply different methods to find out which signifier represents the totality of the discursive formation, the nodal point reveals itself in a simple way. At the end, we come to a conclusion that every protestor shared as a common ground: resistance.

Out of over 1000 graffiti, 164 of them have been handpicked regarding the aforementioned criteria. Hypothetically, signifiers within those 164 graffiti possess the potential to be fixed within the field of discursivity and become an empty signifier in various contexts. There are many different signifiers within the selected graffiti and I grouped those under 3 categories: values (24 graffiti), subjects (40 graffiti) and dissents (100 graffiti). The categories will be deconstructed in the analysis.

Here, I must note that, the remaining 800-some graffiti do not contain the signifiers of the handpicked 164. The other 800-some, most of which have humorous or irrelevant content, do not qualify as a graffiti that contain a potential signifier to become the empty signifier of Gezi. However, it should be also be stated that “tear gas”, “police”, prime minister of the time and several others are frequently used

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<sup>10</sup> Eng. looter. This word was used by the capital discourse to characterize the protestors. As soon as the word was used, protestors internalized it and used it as counter-discourse throughout the uprising.

objects in the graffiti. Yet, they cannot be the nodal point of a hegemonic operation, but reinforcements to it.

After the data selection, the analysis of given set of graffiti will be performed with respect to the logics of discourse, and concept of hegemony in particular. Finally, there will be a discussion on the empty signifier of Gezi.

### **B. Methodological Limitations**

First of all, being a native may be a limitation. Not as a graffiti producer, but as a reader and protestor, I have experienced the unrest from the first day. For the health of the study, this situation might be both good and bad. Good, because it provides enthusiasm to study the topic; but might be inferior due to the fact that being native could cause bias. Nonetheless, I believe that an unconditionally unbiased researcher would come up with the same conclusion that I have.

Secondly, the data gathered, even though the time interval fits the necessities and locations are convincingly irrelevant for the case of Gezi, might be insufficient in diversity. My contact with collectors happened with the help of common friends or twitter conversations. In any case, all of the collectors were living in Istanbul. It can be asserted that Istanbul is a sufficient sample to represent the whole country, but, for example Antakya and the resistance over there might have had a more local discourse in graffiti. Yet, such insufficiency, in my opinion, would not affect the common ground of hegemony.

The data handpicking process, due to the dependency on heuristic procedures, might trigger loss in the universal data. Perhaps, assistance from another researcher for handpicking procedure or a person who is simply interested would have been a great value for this research. However, in such empirical, qualitative, descriptive, interpretive and deductive study as this, there is room for minor loss considering the number of corpus and the amount of spray paint used to produce them.

Let us move to our last chapter: Analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, digging the graffiti of Gezi to explore the discursive conditions of a grassroots movement is the departure point of this research. The quest for finding an empty signifier as the representative of the whole hegemonic operation is the ultimate objective of this empirical study. Let us repeat the main research question: what is the empty signifier of Gezi? With such question and logics of articulation in mind, let us begin with arguing over the signifiers in the handpicked dataset and deconstruct our categories of signifiers: values, subjects and dissents.

#### A. Values

There are 24 graffiti out of 164 under the category of values. All graffiti is listed in the appendices and the category of values can be found in between appendix 1 to 24. The analysis will be on a selection of graffiti in an interpretive manner. Translations of all graffiti can also be found in the appendix section.

The category is named “values” because there are universal values that signify a demand. Here is the list and frequencies of signifiers:

Signifier	Frequency
Freedom	8
Justice	4
Love/Making love	2
Peace	2
Rights	2
Democracy	2
Equality	1
Bravery	1
Child	1
Pencil	1
Homeland/nation/religion	1

**Table 1.** List of signifiers in Values and their frequencies

With a 14% portion of the dataset, values make up the smallest category within the discursive field of the graffiti of Gezi. “Freedom” being the most repeated signifier, in fact a highly potential one to signify totalities within various hegemonic contexts, is the leading value of its category. Its potential to connote a totality is reflected in a graffito: “Freedom to both hijab and alcohol” (appendix 4). As an encompassing demand, freedom is demanded for everyone. Articulating the religious demand of hijab along with a presumably secular demand, such graffito reveals the flexibility of the discourse within graffiti of Gezi. It also indicates a reiteration of the Gezi’s participant diversity as the commonly attributed quality. In another example “freedom is in the streets” (appendix 12), a subliminal call for action is sprayed on the wall. It is a graffito to be analysed in various contexts. For example, Chaffee’s catharsis/protest explanation as a motivation for writing graffiti can be attributed to the action of writing such graffiti. He says that fury and disappointments of the society from the oppression result in an overflow of passionate expression of individuals (10). Being in the streets to pour out the rage that has accumulated is exposed as a way to be free as such and to experience the catharsis.

Justice is a widely used vocable to be utilized in political discourse. It even exists in political parties’ names. As a broad signifier, justice instores equality, democracy, rights and many more; because logically, anything would be just fine if there is a just system! “Too many police, little justice” (appendix 5) accentuates a serious lack in this respect. Here, the legitimacy of state holding the right to exert coercive force is questioned. In one another, “Justice chopped” (appendix 8) is written. The absence of justice is signified in various ways through graffiti. Additionally, related notions like equality and rights are employed to highlight such absence. For example, another graffito reads “no equality, no love” (appendix 14). In the absence of justice and equality, would love be endangered? According to the famous graffito, it does indeed. Equality is a signifier that is commonly used by feminist movements to emphasize the demand for an egalitarian state between male and female. Love is connected to the right for an egalitarian state. In relation, a graffito tells us to “make love and be free” (appendix 3). Considering both graffiti together, love is expanded in the planes of freedom and equality.

Oddly enough, democracy is not a frequently used signifier within the graffiti of Gezi. In a sarcastic graffiti, the core of the democracy is depicted as police, baton, tear gas and a mask (appendix 20). One another witty graffiti in which democracy is present, the graffiti writer says that “hungry for a morning sleep and democracy” (appendix 13). It looks like insurgents of Gezi coming from various affiliations did not see democracy as the common ground to meet. Dissident discourse seems to disregard democracy as a demand, as it appears only twice. The reason of this disbelief could be a research topic for another study.

Although the words used in the graffiti of the values category are strong signifiers and could have signified the wholeness of a hegemonic project in different contexts, it does not seem that we have found the empty signifier of Gezi yet. Freedom is a strong floating signifier; yet do not represent all of the particularities.

## B. Subjects

Who are the subjects of the uprising? People? Citizens? Women?

There is one subject that is discursively significant: *çapulcu*. Literally, an English translation would be “looter” and this word was mentioned by the head of the capital discourse on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June. In the course of minutes, social networks were shaking with digital protests where *çapulcu* was internalized by the protestors and became the subject of the dissident discourse.

Let us have a look at the deconstruction of subjects:

Signifier	Frequency
Çapulcu and variations	22
Folks	16
Woman	2

**Table 2.** List of signifiers in Subjects and their frequencies

Subjects, becoming the object of politics, are significant to analyse considering discourse. 40 graffiti in subject category make up the 23% of the selected graffiti. All

of the category can be found in the between appendix 24 to 64. Let us start from the least common one: women.

It is important to count woman as a separate category, since women have been inherently prominent figures since the beginning of the protests. On the first day when capital forces were teargasing protestors on the face within a distance of centimetres, “woman in red dress” was firmly standing by. Not long after she became an icon of the resistance. It was possible to see stencils of the woman in red dress around Taksim and Beşiktaş, and extensions of the icon towards surrealism in the digital space. Besides, in Gezi, feminist movements and the cause for the egalitarian state of women and men strongly held their differential positions. Similarly, Nicoarea talks about representations of women in the graffiti of Tahrir. She reminds the “woman with the blue bra” whose bra revealed while capital forces were dragging and hitting her. Soon after, blue bra became a symbol of the revolt. Nicoarea indicates that her identity is still unknown; but it is the representative of the bravery of exhibited by Egyptian woman (258). Even though such courageous involvements, I found “woman” less than anticipated as a signifier. Comparing the graffiti and other means of street art I have come across within the universal dataset, feminists used many words considering resistance, barricades and revolution; but not “woman” as much. For instance, a stencil reads “five women are killed in this country everyday” (appendix 25). The data can be fact-checked, though the possibility of it is enough to freak one out. Another graffiti says “some women make revolution”. It might sometimes count as a revolution for some women in Turkey to merely go out to the streets. Therefore, the graffiti can be interpreted in many ways. In anyway, with the word “some”, I believe the point is made: not all yet can.

In Turkish, there is a word called *halk* and in English it is not used as frequently as the former. Meaning “the people”, citizens, folks, public etc. *halk* seems to be a widespread word to characterize the protestors. It implies a response to conspiracies claiming that protestors were marginal, foreign backed or *çapulcu*. The folks/capital dichotomy appears to rise from the graffiti. To illustrate, a graffiti reads “police ignited, folks extinguished” (appendix 35). Trying to be informative about a fire in the park, and implying that it was a provocation by the police, folks and capital are

represented as two opposite poles. Very similarly, the police tag on the metal fences was spray painted reading *halk* again (appendix 47). Pointing out the clashes, one another graffiti records the violence: “police beat the folks here yesterday night, remember” (appendix 44). A funny graffiti reads “no fear dude, it’s us, folks” (appendix 38). It is clear that the emphasis on folks is due to the clashes which create the antagonism between the police and the people. Graffiti writers feel the need to remind that they are just the people who, in fact, pay taxes and get the police work. *Halk*, here, is an important signifier, because everyone shares the same feeling: everyone is from the folks. It looks like graffiti performers wanted to remind it to the consumers of their media. Nevertheless, as a strong subject, *halk* is slightly behind *çapulcu*, as the latter has higher frequency and numerous patterns of reproduction.

Taking numerous forms, conjugations and patterns; being appropriated to English; appearing in songs... *çapulcu* is the subject of Gezi Park protests. Distorted in a witty way, *çapuling* or *to çapul* (or to *chapul* in some forms) becomes the verb to denote “doing something for or about Gezi”. Signifying any kind of protest and any form of resistance including painting, singing, talking, chanting or thinking, *çapuling* is one of the most widely used symbols of dissident discourse. Referring to an appropriated pop song, “Everyday I’m çapuling” was an iconic sentence of describing the routine of the resistance (appendix 39, 60). Another famously appropriated graffiti reads “I çapul, therefore I am” (appendix 41, 44). As a matter of fact, the leap of consciousness triggered by the protests is acknowledged in this graffiti. The ontological possibility seems to be veiled in becoming a *çapulcu*. *Cogito ergo sum* founding the base of Western philosophy, *çapuling* enhances the contingent “us”: it designates the very individual who has every means equivalent with “the other”. *Çapulcu* turn out to be a nodal point around which the discourse is stabilized. Equivalences get into a chain and *çapuling* represents that chain. That is why the protesters “keep calm and çapuling” (appendix 43).

So far, *çapulcu* and *çapuling* came along as the most comprehensive signifiers to represent the chain of equivalences. Due to the fact that they are genuinely unique discourses, they signify the totality of the subjects. However, *çapulcu* was not a particularity that was inherent to the hegemonic project. It happened to become a

widespread signifier due to a counter discourse operation. It was an outsider until it was universally internalized. Let us continue to dissent category and discuss the signifiers of opposition.

### **C. Dissents**

Chaffee underlines various motivations for writing graffiti. “The marginalized group, alternative media explanation” is one of them. He gives the Greens in Europe or gender movements as an example. Excluded from the conventional media, marginalized groups might seek audience for recognition and might have to establish their own means of information dissemination. He further suggests that mainstream groups may also be in the same pot (12). Currently, thanks to new media, reaching audiences is at ease for any kind of faction. Still, call for streets can be disseminated by street art. Dissents are emphasized in the street. Moreover, add “street art as political inspiration explanation” on the top of the former, things will clear up.

“Street art can be a means to inspire people, to energize them, to raise spirits and generate morale. This is most pronounced at times of crisis, war or revolution.” (Chaffee 20)

Actually, most of the graffiti in the universal set were omitted during handpicking process due to their characteristic to be just inspirational. Searching for moments to signify particularities and perhaps universality, I had to disregard them. On the other hand, the ones with dissent also gave energy to the resistance. In fact, resist/resistance turned out to be the most frequently used signifier within the graffiti of Gezi! And still humorously! But, first, let us evaluate revolution and rebellion. Resistance will be elaborated subsequently.

<b>Signifier</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Resist/Resistance	67
Revolution	16
Rebellion (revolt)	14
Salvation	1
Fight	1
Occupy	1

**Table 3.** List of signifiers in Dissents and their frequencies

“Revolution” is a highly repeated signifier in Gezi’s graffiti. Making up almost the 10% of the selected dataset, revolution is the desire of the dissidents. Perhaps, not implying a revolution by the means of overthrowing a government, but mentally Gezi was a revolution for many. Due to the fact that the uprising emerged from the park and for the trees, it was initially an ecologic action. “Viva ecological revolution!” is a slogan to emphasize the origin of the movement (appendix 125). Gentrification, deforestation and water resource degradation being the contemporary issues of Istanbul along with climate change being the biggest challenge that humanity faces, significance of ecologism to spark such a revolutionary move is appreciated within graffiti. Additionally, the articulatory practice alongside ecologists generated a large alliance against the capital discourse. “Oh, downright revolution” is another graffiti enunciating the widespread belief that it is not the objective to overthrow the capital, but acknowledging that things has changed (appendix 146). Using an anti-homophobic tone, this graffiti can be interpreted as saluting the achievement of hegemony regardless of its actual political result. Another graffiti reads “mothers make kids, kids make revolution” in which a reference to families being supportive of their children to march in the streets is indicated (appendix 126). This graffiti exhibits the interruption of the usual family reaction towards their children to involve in politics. Historically related to the coup d’état in 1980, parents were claimed to admonish their children not to take part in politics. This graffiti utters its expiration by Gezi protests.

Similar to that of revolution, “rebellion” or “revolt” is an extensively utilized signifier in the graffiti of the grassroots movement. “Rebellion is a right” (appendix 143), “peace is in rebellion” (appendix 70), “stay with the revolt” (appendix 84) bring up the feeling of the dissidents to revolt against oppression. In addition, “if persecution is legitimate, rebellion is a right” (appendix 94) depicts the same approach in favour of the revolt. Restrictions to voice demands, being unable to participate in decision making and suppressed democratic rights to march independently result in a reflection of fury in terms of rebellion. Graffiti is the place to verbalize them.

Revolution and rebellion being very strong signifiers within the dissent category, they also gave rise to the emergence of “resistance”. Even though “occupy” was an international signifier to call for action, it is interesting not to see it frequently in the graffiti. Nevertheless, to achieve occupying a space and to be able to put the demands into words, one needed to come over the coercion first, and that was merely possible by resistance. Let us finalize our analysis with discussing resistance as a signifier.

#### **- Resistance and the Rise of an Empty Signifier**

Dividing when brutality blurs the scene and uniting when the air is clear, resistance is the shared act among the variety of players of Gezi from the first moment on. In order to stop the demolition despite the sustained coercion, resisting the pain was the mere solution. No matter what political background or socio-economical class the individual came from, conditions of survival boosted the willpower of the protestors to resist the demolition. Since the beginning, resistance was the common ground, in our terminology the nodal point, of the hegemonic operation. All particularities became equivalent behind the universality of physical pain and the determination to resist.

40% of the selected graffiti and 67% of the dissents category, “resistance” and its variations are the most frequently used signifiers within the graffiti of Gezi. Humorously, satirically and sometimes ironically, the word was deformed, distorted, expanded and reproduced in different patterns. Resistance evolved into a multiplicity

of actions where the antagonistic front was formed. The meaning of the word accommodated a variety of activities such as graffiti writing, thinking or drinking *çay*.

The ontological possibility of a grassroots movement to form an antagonistic border is situated in structuring a system of equivalences where particularities align with one another. The negation or opposition to the oppression must be shared within the chain of the equivalents so that articulating parties reposition themselves along the line. Identification of the mass and subject positions take on a stance considering their equivalences and differences. The forefront of the alliance is the empty signifier that has the ability to represent the totality of the articulatory practice. One particularity becomes the intersection of all discourses interior to the antagonistic border around the nodal point on which the discourse is stabilized. The initial peaceful resistance was indicating a negation to the capital: do not demolish the park. This negation reflected itself on the surface of the walls as resistance and its various forms by which the negation turned into a positivity to represent the demands of the articulated segments of society. Going on the streets, marching, chanting slogans, being over there, *çapulung*, writing graffiti, singing, falling in love and many more actions became forms of resistance and the amalgamated within the notion. Even though resistance as such was utilized in its actual meaning at first, polysemy was created by distortion of the word and by attributing additional actions to the notion.

*Diren* which means resist and *direnış* which means resistance were the two prominent forms that can be found in Gezi's graffiti. *Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş* being one of the most chanted slogans meaning "everywhere is resistance, everywhere is Taksim" also commonly exists in the graffiti (appendix 91). Next to the Gezi Park, Taksim (square) is the *de facto* centre of Istanbul, along with being the historical marching place of May Day and probably the most cosmopolitan spot in the city. The resistance began in Taksim and Gezi Park; therefore the slogan and the graffiti refer to the diffusion of the action with reference to the spot. A distorted version of this graffiti reads "resistance is everywhere, talcid is everywhere" (appendix 92). The way to heal the burn from the tear gas was using anti-acid medicine and most of the protestors carried various liquidated anti-acid with

themselves. The graffito indicates the widespread use of such medicine. On social networks, #DirenGezi and #DirenGeziParkı and variations of topics containing #diren were among the most frequently used labels. So do in graffiti. #Diren (appendix 116, 117, 120, 161, 164), #DirenGeziParkı (appendix 97, 157, 163); #DirenGezi, Diren X or #direnX (x stands for miscellaneous, appendix 72, 73, 74, 78, 79, 86, 88, 96, 101, 102, 110, 111, 119, 149, 152, 158, 162) has taken numerous forms. *Direnışçi kızlar çok güzel* meaning “resisting girls are very beautiful” is also a graffito that was widely written on walls (appendix 87, 137, 151, 156). Such graffiti draw the attention to the women that actively participate in the resistance. Another graffito reads *kızlar direnek mi?* or *Filiz, direnelim mi?* meaning “girls, shall we resist?” (appendix 71, 77). With female names and the word “girls” resistance is encouraged with a witty language. Deforming the vocable to a daily speech use, resistance takes a form which I would timidly call romantic. In metonymical dimension, resistance seems to disguise sensuality. Besides love and romanticism, in various cases the signifier is linked to music, life and freedom. “We are the two in love: freedom and resistance” is read in one graffito (appendix 131). Similarly, “Darling, let’s resist” exhibits a romantic attribution to the act (appendix 81).

The discursive cohesion in resistance is a reflection of human reactions to the unrest that takes a physical, psychological and ideological form. It implies the moment when “subordination become a relation of oppression“ (Laclau ve Mouffe 153). The response to the oppression is resistance. The discursive conditions in the graffiti of Gezi verify that hegemony is proven by physical resistance which incarnated a multiplicity of actions within itself. Manifestation of the hegemonic relationship is revealed by the presence of such signifier which fills the absence of positivity that was initially a negation to the oppression. In other words, “[T]he presence of empty signifier is the very condition of hegemony” (Laclau 43).

#### **D. Conclusion**

The origin of this study is grounded in investigating the discursive conditions of a hegemonic relation. Political graffiti as a mass communication medium is the place where the grassroots expression of thoughts, emotions, grievances and

commemoration is reflected. The collective, partisan, democratic, upright and flexible nature of such medium offers a domain with which the contingent relations can be examined. How a hegemonic relation is manifested with such grassroots communication technique is the departure point of this research. Postulating that thought and reality are parts of the same experience, and discourse is the precise field for them to be conveyed, I set out to analyse the discursive conditions of the articulated interests with respect to graffiti. Such quest is in assistance to the query of “understanding the social” because, as cited in the introduction, Laclau and Mouffe perceive social as a discursive space. People gathering around the same cause and common objective might demonstrate a discursive cohesion, despite being unaware of each other. Therefore looking into the discourses might reveal how reality is constructed socially within a decentralized medium. The main research inquiry here is to find an empty signifier. It is a meaningful intellectual expedition, since the potential answer conceals the political and cultural practice patterns. The discretely produced individualistic graffiti reflects the view of one particular person (or a group) while, perhaps, manifesting the totality of a grassroots movement. As graffiti is a non-institutionalized medium, the emergence of an empty signifier becomes a social production. Each and every act of graffiti writing reproduces the hegemonic relation. Analysing the signifiers within each graffiti matters; because there are particular ones that are repeated and internalized vastly. Which one is it? Which one is the most effective? Which one absorbs the repression and actively responds to it at the same time? Which particularity reflects the universality of the movement? Which signifier is the one that shows the proven hegemony?

In Gezi hegemony was proven in the streets, by the folks and *çapulcus*. However, it does not matter for this study if hegemony is proven or by whom hegemony is proven. It is important to see the hegemonic relation provided by the substantial antagonism that displays the wrestling for the superiority. As we set out to explore its discursive conditions regarding graffiti, the mere presence of antagonism opened a field for discourses to clash for hegemony. Presuming that everything happens within the discursive milieu, I tried to determine a nodal point around which the discourse is stabilized and equivalences and differences intersected. If the existence of empty signifier is the evidence for hegemony, then the research shows that “resistance”

have proven it. *Halk* and *Çapulcu* are the main actors of the dissident discourse and the most desired value is freedom.

This study argues that Gezi as a hegemonic project manifests its discourse on the walls as graffiti and the empty signifier of the hegemonic project was resistance. Initially being a negation, opposition turned into positivity. “Do not demolish” switched to “resist”. All factions of the society were equal in the face of coercion, and they unconsciously expressed the positivity to resist collectively. Around the signifier of resistance, the flow of differences is locked and equivalences are privileged. With use of humour, distortion and different patterns of reproduction, fantasmatic elements enhanced the dispersion. More individuals experienced the cruelty, greater the representation become. The particularity of persistent environmentalists enhanced to a universal that identifies and communicates all articulated particulars. The hegemony was temporally proven by resistance. It embodied other forms of action like making love or *chappulling*, on the way to loosen its ties with its actual meaning to become universal by emptying itself. According to Laclau, universal is an empty place (Laclau, *Identity and Hegemony* 58).

This paper investigates a temporal discursive case and attempts to deduce answers for questions regarding the social. As aforementioned, social is considered as a discursive space; therefore I looked into perhaps the most democratic mass medium to ponder upon the social. As the unit of analysis, the notion of empty signifier is used in the framework of hegemony. The question is open ended, that is why it remains intact and is open for further qualitative or quantitative researches. For the case of graffiti, it is possible to utilize different units of analysis to go deeper into it. For hegemony and discourse theory, they are vastly applicable to any kind of social surface. Perhaps they could be used for analysing the discourses of Gezi within social networks, as they have shared qualities with graffiti such as being decentralized, democratic and versatile. Researching discourses in new media can provide a large data to find answers for questions regarding social. Digging into the discursive conditions and articulatory practices of grassroots movements might help us understand the logic of social.

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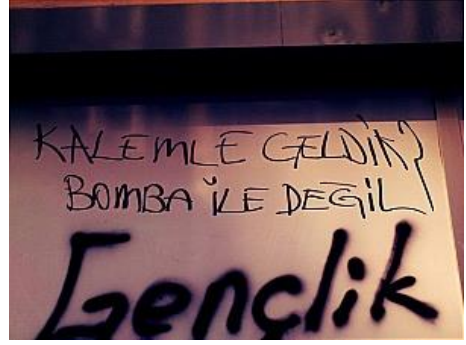
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## Appendices



**Appendix 1.** Parties come and go, governments fall. Cruel passes away, homeland and nation stays.



**Appendix 2.** Came with pencil, not with bomb. Youth



**Appendix 3.** Make love and be free



**Appendix 4.** Freedom to both hijab and alcohol



**Appendix 5.** Too many police, too little justice



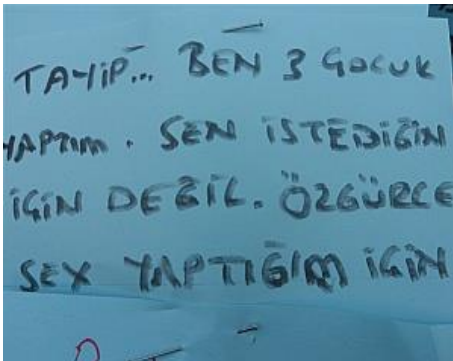
**Appendix 6.** Peace everywhere



**Appendix 7.** We are the people



**Appendix 8.** Justice chopped



**Appendix 9.** I made three kids. Not because You wanted, but because I had sex freely.



**Appendix 10.** Would there be peace with grave stones?



**Appendix 11.** This freedom is awesome mate



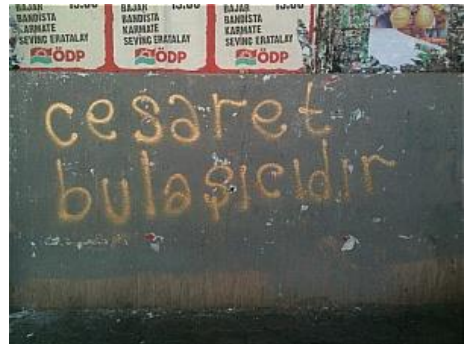
**Appendix 12.** Freedom is in streets



**Appendix 13.** I miss the morning sleep and the democracy.



**Appendix 14.** If no equality, no love!



**Appendix 15.** Courage is contagious



**Appendix 16.** Did Tayyip forgot his conscience at home?



**Appendix 17.** Freedom to junkies



**Appendix 18.** Mothers make kids, kids make revolution



**Appendix 19.** We want rights not gas



**Appendix 20.** Fundamentals of advanced democracy



**Appendix 21.** The day freedom comes, it's forbidden to die



**Appendix 22.** Bread, justice, freedom



**Appendix 23.** Right is not given, it's taken



**Appendix 24.** No justice



**Appendix 25.** Everyday five women are killed in this county



**Appendix 26.** You feared from folks today as much as you fear god



**Appendix 27.** Don't forget the police beating folks here yesterday night



**Appendix 28.** Capuling Istanbul eyes wide shut



**Appendix 29**



**Appendix 30**



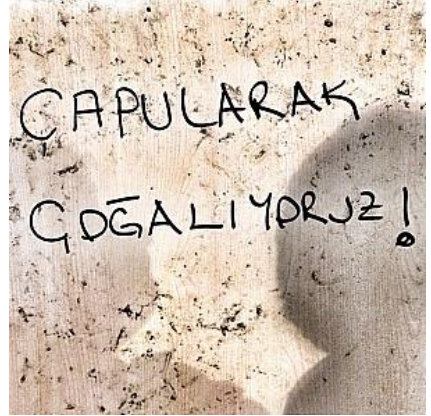
**Appendix 31.** Don't kill your own people



**Appendix 32**



**Appendix 33**



**Appendix 34.** Growing by çapuling



**Appendix 35.** Police set people extinguished



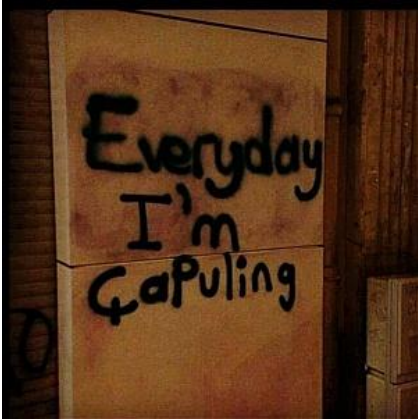
**Appendix 36.** Folks wer e here



**Appendix 37.** Folks fuck



**Appendix 38.** Don't worry dude, it's us, folks



**Appendix 39**



**Appendix 40.** Folks no sheep



**Appendix 41**



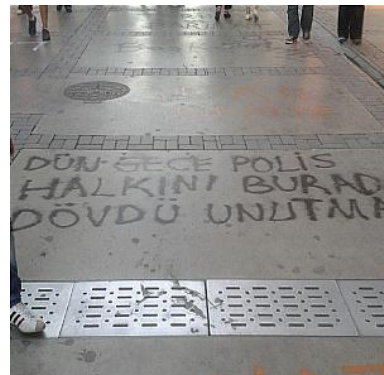
**Appendix 42**



**Appendix 43**



**Appendix 44**



**Appendix 45.** Don't forget the police beating folks here yesterday night



**Appendix 46.** Çapulcu, yea? Ook.



**Appendix 47.** Folks



**Appendix 48.** I'm Turkish, right, çapulcu, thinner sniffer, fascist, drunk, nonbeliever, infidel İzmirer. How happy is the one who says I am Turkish!



**Appendix 49**



**Appendix 50.** Organized folks are undefeatable



**Appendix 51.** These folks are awesome dude!



**Appendix 52.** These folks wouldn't kneel to you



**Appendix 53.** When folks are fearless, they are scary.



**Appendix 54.** These folks wouldn't kneel to you



**Appendix 55.** Don't be stupid, listen to the folks



**Appendix 56.** Folks are hungry, and police hang out by Mini Cooper



**Appendix 57.** Some women make revolution



**Appendix 58.** Çapulcu was here



**Appendix 59**



**Appendix 60**



**Appendix 61.** No pasta is cooked in çapulcu's pot



**Appendix 62**



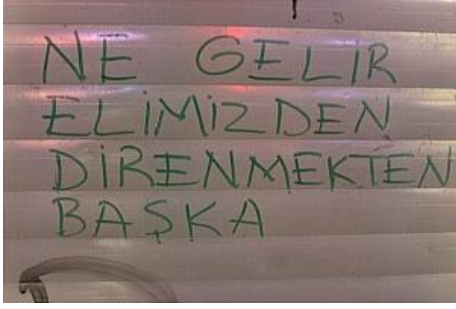
**Appendix 63**



**Appendix 64.** Chapuling



**Appendix 65.** A kiss from her resistance?



**Appendix 66.** What can we do if not resist?



**Appendix 67.** Next resistance comes for the ones who love but split



**Appendix 68.** Resist with persistence



**Appendix 69.** Can't resist with a side bag



**Appendix 70.** Peace is in rebellion



**Appendix 71.** Girls shall we resist?



**Appendix 72.** #resistyozgat



**Appendix 73**



**Appendix 74**



**Appendix 75.** İsyân (rebellion) + İstanbul.



**Appendix 76.** I'm rebellious!



**Appendix 77.** Filiz, shall we resist?



**Appendix 78.** #PoliceJoinResistance



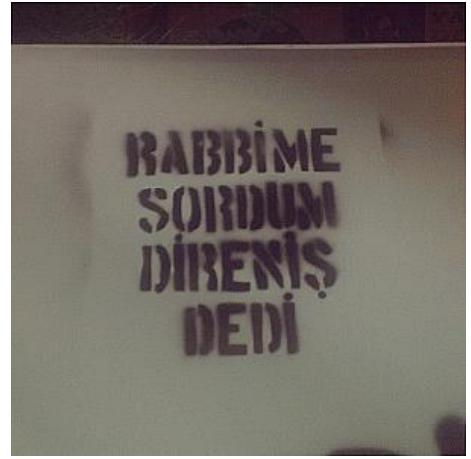
**Appendix 79**



**Appendix 80.** Resist with persistence, not swearwords



**Appendix 81.** Darling, let's resist



**Appendix 82.** I asked God, he said resist



**Appendix 83.** Light the revolution joint!



**Appendix 84.** Stay with the revolt



**Appendix 85.** Welcome to the resistance



**Appendix 86**



**Appendix 87.** Resisting girls are very beautiful



**Appendix 88**



**Appendix 89.** I asked God, he said #Direngezi



**Appendix 90.** In memory of resistance



**Appendix 91.** Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance.



**Appendix 92.** Everywhere is talcid, everywhere is resistance.



**Appendix 93.** #DirenGeziParkı, Taksim is here.



**Appendix 94.** If persecution legit, rebellion is a right.



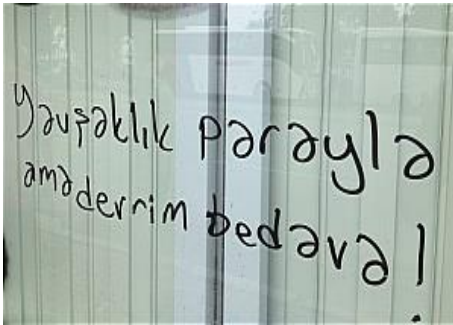
**Appendix 95.** Turk, be beaten, clash, resist.



**Appendix 96.** Down with Lannister (up).



**Appendix 97**



**Appendix 98.** Being asshole costs, but revolution is for free!



**Appendix 99.** Grandkids of shamans revolt!



**Appendix 100.** Revolutionary gays are everywhere!



**Appendix 101.** Resist iPhone battery!



**Appendix 102.** Resist with love



**Appendix 103.** Salvation 2.0 loading



**Appendix 104.** That's the way we revolt



**Appendix 105.** Revolt



**Appendix 106.** Resistance is resurrection



**Appendix 107.** Fats resist, too



**Appendix 109.** Spinal disc in resistance



**Appendix 108**



**Appendix 110**



**Appendix 111**



**Appendix 112.** We are resisting dude



**Appendix 113.** I'm resisting



**Appendix 114.** If persecution legit, rebellion is a right



**Appendix 115.** We are here. Resisting. In barricades. Feminists.



**Appendix 116**



**Appendix 117**



**Appendix 118.** Time to revolt for Istanbul



**Appendix 119**



**Appendix 120**



**Appendix 121.** Fight is the freedom fight



**Appendix 122.** Keep calm and Diren



**Appendix 124.** Resistance with rice, lord!  
(Rarely found, signature graffiti example from Gezi)



**Appendix 123.** If you read this, you are the resistance



**Appendix 125.** Viva ecological revolution



**Appendix 126.** Mothers make kid, kids make revolution.



**Appendix 127.** There is no you or me, but revolution!



**Appendix 129.** To live is to resist



**Appendix 128.** Victory by resistance



**Appendix 130**



**Appendix 131.** We are the two in love:  
Resistance and freedom



**Appendix 132.** Tipsy revolution



**Appendix 133.** Resisting girls are very beautiful.



**Appendix 134**



**Appendix 135.** Revolt



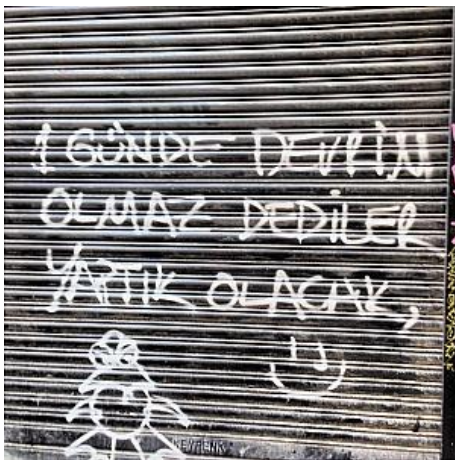
**Appendix 136.** Did you feel the resistance?



**Appendix 137.** Revolutionary girls are so beautiful



**Appendix 138.** Resisted and aborted the dead citizen inside



**Appendix 139.** Said no way to make revolution in one day. We will!



**Appendix 140.** Occupy if yours!



**Appendix 141**



**Appendix 142. Resistance everywhere**



**Appendix 143. Revolt is a right**



**Appendix 144. Dissidents of the world, unite!**



**Appendix 145. I think resistance is the best**



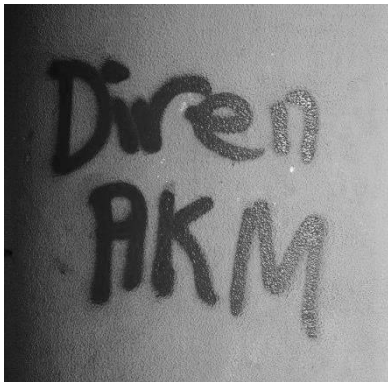
**Appendix 146.** Oh, downright revolution



**Appendix 147.** Revolution is the only way



**Appendix 148.** Revolt



**Appendix 149.** Resist Ataturk Culture Centre



**Appendix 150.** Welcome to the revolution



**Appendix 151.** Resisting girls are very beautiful



**Appendix 152**



**Appendix 153.** Revolution



**Appendix 154.** Resisting penguins



**Appendix 155.** Resistance



**Appendix 156.** Resisting girls, you are very beautiful



**Appendix 157**



**Appendix 158.** #SportsClubJoinResistance



**Appendix 159.** Feminist rebellion



**Appendix 160.** Antarctica resists



**Appendix 156.** Resisting girls, you are very beautiful



**Appendix 157**



**Appendix 159.** Feminist rebellion



**Appendix 158.** That morning, we got up from fear, not sleep



**Appendix 160.** Antarctica resists



**Appendix 161**



**Appendix 162**



**Appendix 163**



**Appendix 164**



**Appendix 165. Oh Biber!**



**Appendix 166. Coward media**