Gezi Park and Taksim Square: Reflections and Reactions:

Islamic Conservatism, Predatory Neoliberalism and the Continuing Courage of the Resistance

By **Dave Hill** who was in Turkey at the start of the Turkish Spring in mid-May earlier this year, and is due to return, to work with resistance trade union and political forces. Turkey has slipped off the front pages and television screens, but the repression- and the resistance continues.

Courage, bravery, comradeship, solidarity, youth, tear gas, riot police, batons, shields, gas masks and water cannon, death, blinding, euphoria, intimidation, more courage, fatigue, exhilaration, the smell of tear gas, stinging and burning, eyes watering, running from the police charge, indiscriminate police violence, chemically modified caustic water from water cannon, mass demonstrations, unity in opposition, albeit temporary, spontaneity yet with organisation, hope but despair, then hope again, the repressive state apparatuses and the ideological state apparatuses in the service of AKP and sections of Turkish Capital, transnational and national Capital in its brutal nakedness- the combined brutality of neoliberal immiseration and brute force. And Erdogan's astonishment. And the disbelief mong oppressors and oppressed. And astonishment through the globe. At the global revelation of Capitalist brutality in Turkey, at the global understanding of Erdogan's conservative antisecular Islamicisation of society and education in Turkey. The neoliberal-Islamic conservative nexus. Of secularists and socialists under siege, of liberals and Labour labelled as 'the enemy', of workers and trade unionists trampled and imprisoned, of peaceful demonstrators demonised and detained. While the world looked on in amazement. And laughed at the idolatry of the new Sultan, Erdogan, lauded by his supine media and ministers. And at Erdogan's flailing depictions of the protestors as `internal traitors and external

collaborators'. And realised the laughter was hollow when the global screens showed the blood, the dignity, the solidarity, the youth, the justice of the protesters, the two week long peaceful commune that had been Gezi.

These are my reactions to Gezi Park. I was in Istiklal Street, Galatasaray and Taksim Square, with young comrades, through mid- May 2013, days before the occupation of Gezi Park. The smell of tear gas was in the heart of Istiklal Street. I recognised the smell, hanging in the air like a bitter perfume. Anger was in the air, too, over the forced evictions of the poor to make way for luxury tourist developments, over the destruction of the beautiful iconic Emek Theatre cinema. Weeks before, thousands had protested against this further destruction of public space, to be teargassed and watercannoned. I peered in and walked in to the site of destruction, to see the interior, its intricate beautiful ceiling still in place. Machinery was demolishing it. I was ushered out. But the destruction of homes, of the common weal, of people's artistic and of cinematic and cultural heritage, heritage in the name of and in the pursuit of profit, of big business, of commodification and consumerisation, of the relentless juggernaut of Capital, was breeding anxiety. The gentrification of İstiklal Street and commercialization of urban spaces provoked anger. And anger... long-term anger... led to action. To regular protesting and demonstrating and arguing and rallying.

And to repression and state force. With armed police, sten guns, gas masks at the ready, punctuating the tourist and luxury shops along Istiklal Street, the tourist, shopping, spending nirvana of Turkish Capital .

So, the lessons I learned from my time in Istanbul and Ankara in the May of 2013. The time I was met by young comrades from Egitim Sen, the left education workers union in Turkey in Istanbul – Ozden and Sezan and Miriam- and was astonished while at the demonstration in support of dismissed workers from Turkish Airlines, in Istiklal Street, Istanbul. Enlivened by

the vigour, the vitality, the vehemence of the young protesters, and the warmth of their support for, and solidarity with, the sacked Turkish Airlines workers. And also astonished at the strength of the police presence... the numbers, the militarisation, the aggressiveness. From the demonstration, I spoke at a pre-organised Egitim Sen trade union meeting, very close by, fifty metres from the demonstration, on neoliberalism and capitalism in Britain and globally... while outside, within loud earshot, there was the class war. The class war was outside, on the demonstration. And it was inside, too, for action and activism need analysis and organisation. One without the other is useless.

Ankara, where the class war is similar. To Kizilay, where, with a young Turkish comrade, Pinar, and with United States Marxist and Educator, Peter McLaren, at the 18 May demonstration against Turkish pro-US involvement in Syria in the wake of the Rehanli bombing, we were teargassed. And chased. I know when to run, and my legs work well. I escaped the police charge, though not the tear gas. Peter McLaren's legs didn't work so well... he was chased, hurled to the ground by a cop's riot shield, and pursued through a restaurant. In an act of solidarity, common among the café and restaurant workers in that street of demonstration, a restaurant worker hid him and let him escape out the back door. Pinar and I found him, dazed, thirty minutes later wandering in Kizilay.

In Ankara I was cared for by many comrades from different socialist and Marxist organisations at the International Conference on Critical Education held at Ankara University, while staying with other speakers at the Egitim Sen headquarters. The struggles were similar. Against Islamicisation, against attacks on education, against neoliberalism, against inequality, against oppression of Alevis and Kurds - and against the American embrace. The mutual embrace between governments and capitalist classes not just in the cause of national and global neoliberalism, but in the cause of national and global conservatism and the specific *Bellum Americanum* neoconservatism, the permanent war of

the US military-industrial complex for oil, supremacy, and against anybody who stands in their way, Obama and Erdogan shoulder to shoulder against Assad. It was long before the 11 May bomb in Reyhanli that Turks and Kurds and Alevi were rejecting `the American embrace', the Erdogan government polishing the gun barrels of US imperialism.

After I left Turkey, Gezi Park happened. It didn't just happen. It was organised, But it grew and it grew. A plethora of ethnic minority, secularist, socialist, social democrat, feminist, LGBT, environmentalist, ecologists, trade unionists such as KESK, the public sector workers' union that called a strike in support of the Gezi protesters, political groups, organisations and parties, such as the nineteen socialist political parties in Turkey, social activist groups such as the People's House (Halkevleri), football supporters, and high school and university students, many thought previously to be apathetic, and teachers and professors. It was a party. A liberation. A fiesta. A celebration of all that the AKP and Erdogan are not... tolerance, justice, humanity. And, for a time, to the absolute astonishment and obvious fury of the previously scarcely challenged government- successful! And seen across the globe. Then the eviction, the tear gas, the repressive state apparatuses in action, the arrests, of journalists, of protesters. The injuries, the batons, the beatings, the woman in the red dress sprayed at close quarters with tear gas on 29 May, an image circulated world-wide, encapsulating the severity of the police crackdown. And, my comrades imperilled. One Egitim Sen young woman comrade's email, Sezan;s, to me encapsulated the courage, the fear, the determination, the resistance:

the police targeted some chemicals or paint at me yesterday too since I called them "murderers" and ran away. Whatever they shot hit the wall since the street was narrow. My friends called me to the union following this encounter. I watched people setting up barricades in the street and then went inside the union building. I was really scared and tired. Earlier today I was feeling tired and decided not to get involved in

the fighting or the `gas party'. I think I will join the groups on Wednesday. But people are really tired after having been gassed and chased for days. Also, we fear that the next step for the police would be using guns if the crowd insists on getting into the park. We are thinking of what to do next. The most experienced ones are in prison now, and some are injured. We will try to come up with workable and creative ideas and keep resistance alive.

And the resistance has continued, through September, into the autumn. As I write this (28 September), Gezi Park has once again been closed off, and arrests been made because of protests.

There is a new understanding globally, and amazement at 'so this is Erdogan'. New knowledge and understanding. That Erdogan is promoting 'a new religious generation', where secular and socialist teachers and professors are under pressure from Islamic appointees, where Erdogan warns against couples kissing in public, the morning after pill is banned and sale of alcohol further restricted, where the school curriculum becomes more religious than at any time since Ataturk, where the poor have got poorer and the rich richer, the hungry hungrier, the fat, fatter, where the unemployed stay unemployed, where society and economy bifurcate ever more obviously into the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. And amazement in Turkey and globally that this electorally successful, business friendly, US-allying monolith.... Is cracking. That the edifice could crumble. That Erdogan is an autocrat. That a people has woken. To challenge the autocrat. But more than that. To challenge the Islamo-conservatism and neoliberalism of which he is the face.

## **Analysis and Questions**

Above are my reflections and reactions. Below are my analysis and questions. I want simply to make three points of analysis and questioning.

Neoliberalism and neo-conservatism The paths of neoliberalisation and (neo)-conservatism are similar in many countries. But each country has its own history, has its own particular context; its own balance of class forces, its own history and level of organization of the working class, and levels of confidence within the working class. And also within the capitalist class. Turkey has Islamic conservatism, expressed, for example, in terms of religiosity, social and sexual mores, and allied dress codes, and social relations within the family. But it also has a history of secular conservatism, not least under the barbaric military dictatorship of 1980-83. Both conservatisms, secular and religious, demand respect for the status quo- for the neoliberal capitalist status quo.

Today we have been experiencing both neoliberalisation and neoconservatisation in England, in Europe generally, in Turkey, and globally. There are, of course, resistances within neoliberalised states, and also isolated states resisting neoliberalism, such as the states of Cuba and Venezuela. It is important to make clear that neoliberalism is simply the latest stage of capitalism. It is current capitalism. This chapter is written as a critique of neoliberal capitalism and its (neo)-conservative allies, whether secular (as in Britain) or religious (as in the southern states of the USA, or as in Turkey today). But, importantly, this critique is, in essence, a critique of capitalism itself, of capitalist economic relations, of capitalist social relations, of the Capital-Labour relation. Removing neoliberalism and (neo)-conservatism, for example through social democratic reforms, and, in Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa, through secular reforms, may lead to a more compassionate society with some highly valuable welfare, workers' rights reforms and even a slight equalization of income and wealth and power in society, improvements in the material conditions of life and work. And rights of religious minorities and of women. But such reforms, while, to repeat, hugely and highly valuable, will not remove class exploitation by the capitalist class of the labour power of the working class- of whatever gender, religious affiliation or none, of whatever ethnicity, of

whatever strata of the working class. And in this era of immiseration capitalism, of austerity capitalism, it is s clear that rights and benefits of workers, gained by struggle in the decades after the second world war, are being and have been grabbed back in the `class war from above'.

Capitalism and Violence. The iron fist wielded by capital comes in four forms. First there is the economic control, the control by the boss over the worker, the current relative and absolute immiseration of workers in terms of less pay, less health, less wellbeing, less economic security- the violence of totally avoidable poverty. And immiseration, too, in terms of reduced public services, the degradation of the public state, of state education and health and other welfare services. Second, the ideological violence, the perpetual and persistent provocations by the capitalist media and corporate state against workers, minorities, immigrants and against their organisations-political parties, trade unions, social movements, that speak up for and seek to defend the labouring masses and extend their economic, political, social rights. Third, the 'symbolic violence' that demeans and devalues the culture of the working class and of ethnic minorities within education, society, public and private institutions, and the labour market, while privileging the cultural capital (and social capital, and economic capital) of the privileged. Fourth, actual violence. The breaking of bones, of heads, the tear gas canister fired at point-blank range into the protesters face, the police baton or the iron bar of the thug. So, violence either by the state, police, army, judiciary, legislation, or, on occasion, when a ruling capitalist class is threatened by socialists and communists, then the use of Fascist street gangs and murderers, as with the Nazis in Weimar Germany, and with Golden Dawn in Greece, today. The capitalist class not only has reserve armies of labour (in women, in legal and illegal immigrants), it also has a 'reserve army of brutality'the street gangs and murderous violence of Nazis and the Fascists.

Resistance: Educate, Agitate, Organize We Marxists, as activists, as critical citizens and educators and workers, seek to serve and advance the interests of the working class. We have to consistently and courageously challenge the dominant ideology, the hegemony of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class.

At certain times in history, and in certain locations, the disjunction—the gap, the difference—between the material conditions of workers' existence on the one hand, our daily lived experience, and, on the other hand, what the newspapers and the media and the imam and the priest and the rabbi say/ preach, that gap becomes so stark, so obvious, that workers' subjective consciousness changes. At this moment—now—in some countries in the world, the gap between the "official" ideology that "we are all in together" and that "there is no alternative" (to austerity, to Erdogan/ the AKP, to the Democrat-Republican elective dictatorship in the USA). Necessary in leading and developing changes in consciousness, a change in class consciousness, and in playing a leading role in organizing for the replacement of capitalism.

In 1938, in *The Transitional Programme* Trotsky addressed the different types of programmes historically advanced by Marxists and communists, moving the discussion beyond the *minimum programme* (minimum acceptable reforms to protect and improve existing rights and entitlements, such as rights at work, social and political rights)) and the *maximum programme* (socialist revolution, with the type of society ultimately envisaged by Marx, a socialist non-capitalist/ post-capitalist society) that were advanced by late nineteenth and early twentieth century social democrats and by communists of the 3rd international and articulated a new type of programme: the *transitional programme*. A programme `a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class' that makes perfect sense to workers but which would

break capitalism. 'If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands inevitably arising from the calamities generated by itself, then let it perish. "Realizability" or "unrealizability" is in the given instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle. By means of this struggle, no matter what immediate practical successes may be, the workers will best come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery'.

The 'decay, demoralisation and ruin' that Trotsky spoke of then, are, for many millions of workers' families in Turkey and worldwide the dark and depressing reality of the material conditions of existence. The precise organisation and characteristics of the resistance is a matter for strategic and tactical considerations, relating to the current balance (strength, organisations, (dis)-unity) of class forces in specific local and national contexts. Though surely communists and socialists and Marxists must work together-eschewing sectarian separatism- and surely again, the spontaneous solidarity of Gezi Park, Taksim Square, and of Occupy movements worldwide need to synthesise their energy and horizontally organised spontaneity with a (pluralist) Marxist programme and policy development, with organisation. Not canons and party-forms exclusive to the club of the initiated, handed down from above, but, open and welcoming and democratic- a pluralist Marxism.

What is also clear, though, is that the problematic regarding capitalism, for Marxist activists, is not just to reform it, welcome though such reforms, such as a 'minimum programme' are, and active in campaigning for and to protect such reforms we must be. But, regarding capitalism, our task is to replace it with democratic Marxism.

And that takes anger, analysis, activism. And courage. The courage of the young Turkish comrades that shone through Gezi Park, and throughout Turkey, in the hearts and hopes and actions and solidarity of our young comrades.

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