

Property, Dispossession, and Citizenship in Turkey; or, The History of the Gezi Uprising Starts in the Surp Hagop Armenian Cemetery

Ayşe Parla and Ceren Özgül

A Cemetery Haunts the Gezi Protests in Turkey

In June 2013, the Turkish government's plans for transforming a central park in Istanbul into a shopping mall started as merely another instance of the ongoing uricide overseen by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP), but it produced an unexpected outcome. The courageous activism of a thousand members of small-size opposition groups eventually triggered the revolt of tens of thousands of people and the occupation of the park for weeks (D. Özgür 2013).¹ The toll of what became internationally known as the Gezi uprising included eight deaths and thousands of serious injuries resulting from the police's unbridled use of tear gas and plastic bullets. Amid the roar of chants reverberating day and night across the park during its occupation in June 2013, a key historical fact remained but a barely audible whisper: the occupied park once stood adjacent to an Armenian church with a cemetery spread

Our subtitle is a direct adaptation of the eloquent formulation by Hişyar Özsoy (2013) in his news piece on the unearthing of corpses of Kurds who had disappeared during the decades of military rule in Turkey. We would like to thank Andrew Shryock for his wise feedback on a very early version of this paper presented at a session in AAA 2014, the Sabancı University Cultural Studies graduate students who participated in our spring 2015 cultural analysis workshop, and two anonymous reviewers. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are ours.

1. For an excellent insider's account of how a small number of activist groups resisted the municipality's plan to demolish the trees in the park and how their uprising would ultimately be joined by tens of thousands of people, see Deniz Özgür's interview (2013) in the dissident magazine *Express*'s special issue on the Gezi uprising.



Figure 1 Surp Hagop cemetery in 1940, after the Istanbul municipality razed it to the ground. The gravestones were still visible, although displaced and knocked down. Source: Aras Publishing Archive

across fourteen acres (see fig. 1). Less than two decades after the 1923 establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the ruling government confiscated the Surp Hagop cemetery and razed the church that stood there, Surp Krikor Lusavoriç (Nalcı and Dağlıoğlu 2013). The tombstones were used in the construction of the steps of Gezi Park, where the protests took place (see fig. 2).

This article explores the differential property regime on which the Turkish nation-state is founded, the disregard of which even (and especially) by progressive dissident groups during the Gezi uprising constitutes yet another obstruction to equal citizenship. We therefore question the uncritical celebra-



Figure 2 Police teargas as an everyday protest practice. Photograph by Ufuk Koşar

tion of the occupation of Gezi Park, especially when such celebration is unaccompanied by a simultaneous insistence on the reparation of past injustices. We consider Gezi Park as one more piece of state-confiscated property, but also one that has become emblematic in how it reveals a political geography haunted by absences.

Disentangling the Two *Ours* in the Slogan “Our Cemetery, Our Park”

Within the space of the occupied park, acknowledgment of the historical appropriation of the cemetery remained largely limited to a banner, pointedly designed in the form of a gray gravestone, carried by protesters from Nor Zartonk, a cultural and political initiative founded by a small group of young Armenians (see fig. 3). The banner, which had its fair share of circulation on social media, was written in both Turkish and English and read: “You captured our graveyard, but you cannot capture our park!” In much of the by now abundant scholarship on the Gezi uprising, Nor Zartonk’s stance came to represent the support lent by Armenians to the occupation as well as proof of the diversity of the movement’s constituency.

The significance of this small political organization’s participation in the Gezi uprising is without dispute. However, we have misgivings about the work the slogan was made to do by those who celebrated the Gezi uprising as one that included, on an *equal* footing, groups with widely varying political, ethnic, and sexual identifications. Further, we wish to dwell not only on the layers of submerged histories of appropriation that examination of the slogan reveals but also on the limits of this recognition.



Figure 3 Nor Zartonk’s banner, in Turkish and in English. Photograph by Ararat Şekeryan

Activists writing on the Gezi uprising have taken pains to point out that the protests cannot be reduced to the strategic reaction of the so-called secular Kemalists, namely, those who espouse the historically dominant republican nationalist ideology of the Turkish state, against their eternal foe, the Islamists, now by and large represented by the pro-Islamic AKP government. Countering the allegation—made, for example, by Cemil Koçak (2013) and Alparslan Nas (2013)—that Gezi was essentially dominated by the urban, middle-class Kemalist elite, such activist writing on Gezi as well as other scholarship has insisted on the diverse character of the movement. This latter scholarship has underscored how the diversity of Gezi is indicative of the increasingly widespread political discomfort, across different sectors of society, with the AKP government’s neoliberal, conservative, and authoritarian practices (Göker 2013; Iğsız 2013; Tuğal 2013; Özkırımlı 2014). Those who refused this reductionist depiction of Gezi’s ethnic and class character drew attention to everyday manifestations of diversity within the park, especially to the peaceful coexistence of Kurds, Armenians, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals alongside the mainstream Kemalist republicans (E. Yıldız 2013). Several op-eds and social media posts at the time emphasized the transformative consequences of such physical coexistence in that cramped space of the occupied park for a future progressive politics (see Bakiner 2013 for a measured example representative of this optimistic stance). In one of the most circulated pieces, the daily *Radikal* columnist Pınar Öğünç (2013) famously referred to the laicist “aunt”—a particularly Turkish gloss on the kinship term connoting a nonkin but “culturally intimate” (Herzfeld 1997) elderly woman—who mistook the LGBTI flag for the Kurdish flag but still nodded with evident sympathy when corrected. Several video clips demonstrated how supporters of the professional soccer team Beşiktaş, among the most active contingents of the protests, were educated by feminist and LGBTI activists not to use sexist language when chanting slogans. Yet others pointed out how observant Muslims among the protesters conducted their Friday prayers under the protective watch of atheists (CNN Türk 2013). Such allusions to everyday intimacy among groups thought to be antagonistic were repeatedly deployed to demonstrate the transformative potential of the experience of revolt in overcoming what were assumed to be unbridgeable divides.

We locate the slogan of Nor Zartonk, then, in this depiction of the diversity of Gezi that indeed brought together contingents previously thought to be irreconcilable.² Nor Zartonk’s slogan, “You captured our graveyard, but you cannot capture

2. This phenomenon was wonderfully captured by one of the catchiest slogans of the uprising, a playful reference to the global Nokia ads: “Tayyip, Connecting People.”

our park!” came to occupy the “Armenian slot” within this diversity. In the course of the Gezi uprising, protesters repeatedly cited the slogan on social media to demonstrate the support of the Armenian minority for the protest. But let us look more closely at the slogan itself and its reference to the state’s prior history of appropriation. We argue that the first part of the slogan raises concerns that stand in uneasy relation to the heroism of the second part. In those two distinct parts—“our park” and “our cemetery”—the *our* in each, in fact, indexes two different populations. The first *our*, as in “our park,” refers metonymically to the allegedly unified existence of the resisting body, the protesting citizenry that claims the park. The second *our*, as in “our cemetery,” refers to the Armenian community, a minority group that is historically the most incongruous component of this national unity. The rhetorical deployment of the two *ours* signals Nor Zartonk’s aim of rendering the Armenian minority part of the larger unity gathered to defend the park. The slogan thus intends to unify these two *ours*, the *our* of the minority and the *our* of the majority.

Notwithstanding the ways the slogan “unsettled common perceptions of the park as unmarked green-space” (Bieberstein and Tataryan 2013), it also represents a problem intrinsic to the existence of minorities in all nation-states. That minority existence always involves a struggle for survival in an allegedly unified national space has been eloquently demonstrated by critical scholars of political theory and multiculturalism with regard both to national contexts such as the United States or Australia that boast an official commitment to multiculturalism (Brown 2006; Hage 2000) and to various European contexts in which the principle of equality-in-sameness is embraced in the public sphere (Partridge 2012; Mandel 2008; Özyürek 2014; Silverstein 2004). In Turkey, where even the most basic tenets of multicultural policy, such as educational rights (Çayır 2014), are lacking, any account portraying the incorporation of the minority into the majority as unproblematic is bound to conceal not only the official denial of the Armenian genocide (Erbal and Suciyan 2011) but also erasures such as the disavowal of the urgency of contemporary rights claims regarding civil rights (Kurban 2003; Yeğen 2009; cf. Kadioğlu 2008), religious freedom (Erman and Erdemir 2005; Özgül 2014), property (Akçam and Kurt 2012), and education (N. Kaya 2013). We view the AKP government’s policies of tolerance for non-Muslim minorities, hailed especially in the government’s early years by supporters on the left and right as advancing democracy and pluralism in Turkey, as also a part of this denial and erasure. These domestic policies of tolerance are intended to enforce the AKP’s neo-Ottomanist image (A. Kaya 2013). They also redefine the limits of the allegedly unified “our” by excluding minorities’ demands for civil rights and religious

freedoms. In the particular context of the Armenians in Turkey, such policies sustain the rule of majority over minority through a redefinition of Armenian identity as essentially religious (Christian) at the expense of acknowledging the effects of the genocide in its various forms (Özgül 2014). Thus the juxtaposition of the two *ours* in the Nor Zartonk slogan is yet another contemporary manifestation of how minority existence in nation-states is fundamentally fraught. No doubt Nor Zartonk members themselves are aware of this tension; we want to suggest, however, that this was perhaps the only way possible that Nor Zartonk could carve out a sustainable space for itself in the Gezi uprising.

However, the duality of the two *ours* also evokes other pairings within the particular history of the Turkish Republic. The first property in question, “our cemetery,” is the property of the victims of the Armenian genocide. The second property, “our park,” is the property of the sovereign, the victorious Turkish Republic. Since the cemetery no longer exists and its land has forcibly changed hands, the Armenian minority and the ethnically Turkish majority are in an antagonistic relationship *also* through property. The cemetery’s gravestones were dispersed to various parts of the city, including Gezi Park, as Istanbul was rebuilt as a national city, at least in part through the erasure of non-Muslim minority existence (Nalçı and Dağlıoğlu 2011; Nalçı and Dağlıoğlu 2013; Tan 2011). The cemetery is thus an object of appropriation and the symbol of a process in which Armenian and other minority properties were destroyed, dissected, or scattered throughout the city in ways that rendered them anonymous. That the protesters in Gezi do not identify themselves as conscious claimants of these erased properties attests to the amnesia that continues to plague dissident politics in Turkey regarding the genocide and its ongoing repercussions.

Michael Warner, in his seminal essay “Publics and Counterpublics” (2002: 50), identifies three senses of *public*, permeable in usage and practice but, he deems, important to analytically distinguish: (1) the most commonly assumed sense of *the* public as a kind of social totality that may range from the nation to the commonwealth to the city; (2) what in practice is the more prevalent sense of *a* public that is “bounded by the event or by the shared physical space,” for example, a physical audience, or “a crowd witnessing itself in visible space,” or, we may add, the Gezi protest movement; and (3) the uniquely modern sense of *a* public that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.”

In this article we draw primarily on the first two senses of *public*: (1) *the* national public, assumed to comprise a social totality, and (2) *a* public, as in both the majority within that social totality and the public that came into being during the Gezi protests. The deployment of the national public as a social totality does

not commit us to the claim that the national public is a unified one. The sense of social totality as described by Warner is not synonymous with either homogeneity or unity. Furthermore, the first sense, of a social totality, invariably includes aspects of the second sense, namely, that the public is composed of several publics and counterpublics.³ Following Warner's distinction, we argue that the boundaries of *the* Turkish national public have been constructed by the differential property and citizenship regime of the republic that came into existence through, among other ways, the Armenian genocide and the subsequent exclusion and regulation of Armenian difference. Even those who occupy very different points along the political spectrum in Turkey exhibit a similar blindness when it comes to the question of foundational violence, dispossession, and their own privilege as the majority within this national body, a state of affairs that applies also to the (counter) public that came into being during the Gezi protests.

In our reading, therefore, the slogan alludes to the violence of appropriation *in the past* at the expense of a demand for the redress of violence *in the present*, namely, for the restitution of the cemetery. This implies that a precondition for Nor Zartonk's participation in the oppositional movement involved a compromise with respect to the full range of demands that could have been voiced by those Armenians who underscore dispossession as an integral and ongoing component of genocide. The unifying spirit of the movement as well as its kinship with other anti-neoliberal protests around the globe was not to be undermined by what could be perceived as ethnic particularism. To put it differently, protesting the usurpation of the park by the current government with an allusion to past injustice was more palatable than protesting the usurpation of the park with an insistence on reparation of past injustice, a choice that delimits the "domain of the speakable and the domain of the askable" (Butler 2009: 795) even within the dissident space of Gezi.

We realize that we tread a dangerous line here. Drawing attention to the internal hierarchies or erasures that existed within Gezi could easily lapse into or be misinterpreted as the conservative position taken by those who not only refused to support but persistently denounced the Gezi movement. Such denunciations aimed to reduce the magnitude of the uprising, characterizing the participants as a few young people "filled with anger and hatred," acting with the sole motivation of overthrowing the AKP government (Berktay 2014), or as the children of formerly leftist and now upper-middle-class parents who failed in their previous oppositional quest (Mahçupyan 2013). Distancing ourselves from such reduction-

3. For a pertinent analysis of Warner's discussion of public and counterpublic in the context of Alevis in Turkey, see Tambar 2014: 123.

ist positions, we instead ask the following: Why should an acknowledgment of the genealogy of the park under siege undermine the efforts of a diverse oppositional crowd to resist oppressive governmental practices? Is there not a way to insist on the inadequate recognition of this history of appropriation and on the unequal recognition of some oppositional voices within the space of Gezi, without allying ourselves with the conservative backlash against Gezi? In other words, how can we work against the sacralization of the Gezi uprising—a sacralization that continues to this day—without undermining the significance of Gezi in the history of oppositional movements in Turkey?

In one of the few existing critiques of the Gezi protests undertaken in such a spirit, Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook (2015) has offered a brilliant analysis of the performative constitution of multiple—and what she terms “fractured”—publics during the Gezi protests without romanticizing the resistance. Instead, she offers a critique of the celebration of identity politics among pro-protest commentators and analysts. She does not shy away from reflecting on how old and new hierarchies are crafted at the site of resistance and eloquently points out that “missed messages and enduring social resentments among ‘the oppressed’ might speak as loudly as euphoric solidarity” (ibid.: 108). We acknowledge that some degree of “surveillance” of and impatience with internal critique during the uprising itself, when the apparatuses of the state were unbridled in their use of violence against the vulnerable bodies of the protesters, was not only inevitable but perhaps even necessary; what we find alarming is that such surveillance, rather than self-reflexive evaluation of the uprising, continues to predominate, such that any analysis that falls short of celebrating the protests (see also Parla 2013) easily gets castigated as betrayal. In this way, the memory of and nostalgia for the Gezi protests risks becoming immune from critique for many oppositional groups in Turkey.

We further propose that engaging in such antisacralization work is precisely necessary to confront the historical as well as the ongoing state violence that Gezi and other protest movements around it have undertaken to denounce. We also argue that such acknowledgment is crucial if the calls for the “right to the city” that marked the Gezi protests (see, e.g., Kuymulu 2013) are to become more politically meaningful. We especially invite those oppositional groups that position themselves on the left to ask why Nor Zartonk had to assert its presence in Gezi not through a slogan that read, for example, “We want our park *and* our cemetery back” but, instead, by choosing one claim over the other.⁴

4. And, indeed, the lack of such a demand represents a strategic decision taken by the Nor Zartonk members, as evident in the debates that led to the formulation of the final slogan. See Çelebi 2013.

There was, however, an exceptional moment during the occupation. One of the protest events involved the symbolic renaming of one of the little paths in the park after Hrant Dink, the Armenian Turkish journalist who was assassinated in 2007.⁵ Garo Paylan, then the administrator of an Armenian minority school and now a member of Parliament (MP), gave a poignant speech where he declared, “We want our cemetery back.” This commemorative event did not become one of the viral social media Gezi videos, but it did elicit a plethora of anti-Armenian hate speech in one of the popular anonymous public blogs (Izlesene.com 2013). Furthermore, just before Paylan’s speech, the Gezi protester who encouraged the crowd to chant “We are all Hrant Dink, we are all Armenians” was interrupted by a woman in her fifties—that quintessential aunt figure of the protests who came to represent the transformative power of the Gezi experience, the elder generation of women who could, indeed, shed their Kemalist/republican bias. Except, in this instance, the aunt in question did not demonstrate the aforementioned empathy Ögünç made famous in the editorial we cite above. Instead, she invaded the discursive and physical space of the circle and, with visible irritation and impatience, replaced the slogan with her own: “We are all humans, *humans!*” In that angry substitution of *Armenian* with *human*, we see the other, less amicable face of the idealized figure of the aunt of Gezi Park.⁶ The limits of her tolerance are revealed in the moment she is asked to imagine being on an equal footing with an Armenian. We also have here yet another uncensored instance of the dissolution of (Armenian) difference in the name of the presumably all-encompassing unity of “being human.” The moment the crowd identifies with Armenianness, they are silenced.

We thus call for a relentless focus on the appropriation of the Armenian cemetery—the “original sin” of dispossession, if you will—as foundational state violence. Such a focus will enable us to begin coming to terms with the limits of the Gezi uprising in relation to its claims of inclusiveness and diversity. Moreover, it will allow us to unravel the links between, on the one hand, progressive, liberal, and even left-wing calls to promote the allegedly equal, universal citizen in Turkey, which no doubt took on a more politicized turn with the Gezi uprising, and, on the other hand, the differential property regime on which the nation-state is founded and the denial of which impedes the possibility of such equal citizenship. We argue that the question of property appropriation by the state and the reclamation of that property by the resisting public cannot afford to be presentist, as was, unfortunately, the case with the Gezi protests. Nor can a thorough confrontation

5. For a brief account of the Dink assassination trial, see Letsch 2012.

6. For an earlier, nuanced account of the stakes of secular protest in Turkey, see Tambar 2009.

with the Turkish citizenship regime that underlies such presentism be avoided: the ethnic differentiation and hierarchies continue to be embedded in the constitution of citizenship in Turkey.

What Is in a Public Space?

The Gezi occupation has been celebrated as the reclamation of the park by the people. But how were these “people” constituted as citizens in the first place? How have they come to access and now claim *back* these public properties? How have these properties become “public”? A critical exploration of the public character of Gezi Park, or how it became reconstituted as a public park, is crucial for an understanding of differential citizenship practices in contemporary Turkey.⁷ Such an exploration also allows us to think about what gets elided in the ascription of a universal character to the resistance of urban citizens, as recent analyses of the Gezi protests have done in describing them as one more in a series of urban protests and occupy movements across the globe, from Egypt to New York (Mirzoeff 2014; Patz 2014; Öktem 2013).

But property, including what gets appropriated and naturalized as public property, is no simple matter (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Harvey 2003; Humphrey and Verdery 2004). Indeed, the formation of modern Turkish citizenship, as recent critical scholarship has begun to show, is inextricably intertwined with the confiscation of minority properties (Akçam and Kurt 2012; Der Mateossian 2011; Onaran 2010; Kévorkian 2011; Tachjian 2006; Üngör and Polatel 2011). The Turkish Muslim privilege that inheres in Turkish citizenship was bolstered by land and property appropriated from massacred, exiled, or dispossessed minorities, including Armenians, Jews, and Greeks, among others (Aktar 2006; Bali 2008). The dispossession of non-Turkish and non-Muslim populations was not limited to the foundational years but has continued throughout the republic.⁸ In this section, we focus on one particular confiscation of minority property and explore how the “public” character of public commons, including Gezi Park, is a nationalist construct that masks the brutal force of law that went into its making.

The scholarship on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transformation of Istanbul from a capital of empire to a modern republican city depicts

7. Of course, these differential citizenship practices not only rest on the confiscation of minority properties. For the workings of the differential citizenship regime in the case of the Kurdish minority, see A. Yıldız 2001 and Yeğen 2009.

8. The September 6–7, 1955, lootings targeting primarily Greeks and other minorities is among the better-known instances (Güven 2005).

Istanbul as indelibly marked by damage from “wars, invasions, migrations and instant fires” (Çelik 1993: 60–61). Yet one aspect is curiously missing from this picture: the conversion of non-Muslim properties into public places and private estates that facilitated this urban transformation. One series of confiscations involved the transformation of non-Muslim property into highly visible and symbolic governmental offices. The most famous among these is the Çankaya Palace (Çankaya Köşkü), the former official residence of the president of Turkey, which once belonged to an Armenian family, the Kasabians (Üngör and Polatel 2011: 84).

Another such project, this time for the creation of a Western-style public space was the Taksim Promenade, the sizable space that includes today’s Taksim Square, right next to Gezi Park; the National Radio House; and the international luxury Divan and Hyatt hotels. In June 1936, the French architect and urban planner Henri Prost was commissioned to create a Western-style yet simultaneously distinctly national urban space in Istanbul (Bozdoğan 2002). Among Prost’s several projects, Gezi Park, or the İnönü Esplanade as it was then called, was arguably the largest. Prost described the area where the municipality was planning to build the esplanade with the following words: “The area included the *old remains* of an old cemetery, several jerry-built garage buildings, a barracks in ruins, and a number of shops and cafés around the square where the monument was located” (quoted in Bilsel 2010: 123–24; emphases ours).

However it might have appeared to Prost’s gaze, “the old remains of an old cemetery” was not an accurate description. Prost reiterates the oldness and derelict character of the space (see also Pervititch 2003: 125–27), but what Prost designates as the remains of a cemetery were in fact part of a larger Armenian *vakıf* (charitable foundation) property appropriated by the state (see fig. 4).⁹ The appropriation took place through a series of court cases that began in 1931 and, despite several appeals by the Armenian Patriarchate, definitely concluded in 1939 in favor of the municipality’s decision. We know from the court records that an appeal was entered in 1931 against the municipality: Two representatives of the patriarchate presented documents to the Office of Title Deeds, documents that rebutted the municipality’s claim that the land was derelict.¹⁰ Prost’s overemphasis on the ruin, therefore,

9. “Non-Muslim foundations, which were the legacy of Ottoman law and state tradition, had a crucial function as institutions that regulated the social lives of non-Muslims and supported their religious, educational, health care, and charitable institutions. These foundations also managed an immense wealth in the form of real estates” (Kurban and Hatemi 2009: 7).

10. For a detailed account of the legal proceedings regarding the cemetery, see İstanbul Ermeni Vakıfları 2012.



Figure 4 A gravestone unearthed from the Surp Hagop Armenian cemetery laying upside down amid urban redevelopment in a neighborhood near Gezi Park (Source: Etkin Haber Ajansı)

ended up serving as a rhetorical device for the government to legitimize the illegal transfer of property.¹¹

The more celebratory scholarship in Turkey on the Gezi occupation has tended to foreground the neoliberal character of the government assault on a public space and to consider it part of the larger urban transformation under way around the entire city and, indeed, around the globe (Fırat 2011; Köse 2014). More specifically, the threat to Gezi is analyzed as the encroachment of urban development upon the lives of ordinary citizens, a process in which the interest of capital precedes that of people. For example, after stating that Taksim Square's redesign is part of the AKP's neoliberal economic policies, Jay Cassano (2013) writes: "Istanbul's city center has been undergoing a rapid process of gentrification, especially in the historic neighborhoods of Sulukule, Tarlabası, Tophane, and Fener-Balat, which housed the poor, the immigrants, the Kurds, and the Roma. The goal of this so-called 'urban renewal' is to make room for more tourist attractions, or to—at minimum—'clean up' the neighborhoods, removing working class urban dwellers who might scare off tourists." Cassano's depiction of the ruling party policy regarding urban transformation is a concise one. What

we want to consider, however, is the subsequent analytic move that identifies the occupation of the park and other public spaces as yet another local instance of revolutionary practices across the globe. In this mode of analysis, the overarching frame is how public commons are defended and reclaimed against neoliberal assault. Begüm Ö. Fırat (2011) has made one such representative analysis, examining the social movement against the appropriation of the historic Emek Cinema,

11. For Prost's perspective on Turkish nation building, see Akpınar 2003.

which was to be demolished and replaced by a new theater as part of a shopping mall development. Following David Harvey (2003), Firat (2011: 101–3) first notes that such projects serve an important function “in the management of capitalist crises that result from overaccumulation and in the absorption of capital” and then states that the marketization and reification strategies of neoliberalism target state property and relegate it to secondary status. Now, Harvey (2003: 157) does indeed define the privatization of public assets as the “cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession.” However, what is missing in Firat’s emulation of Harvey is the question of how public commons have come to be constituted as such in the first place. It may well be that neoliberalism targets public (state) property. But what are the origins of this property that the state uses in the name of the public? While Firat rightly draws our attention to the public character of the public commons and the right to access these public commons, elided is a discussion of what is understood by the *public*, as well as the historical and contemporary exclusions on which the very notion of public rests.

The particular building that Firat urges be reclaimed as public property used to be—once again—minority property, the Serkildoryan (Cercle d’Orient) building that once housed the royal club of the Ottoman Empire. The building was appropriated from its Jewish owners by the Istanbul municipality through the wealth tax regulation launched in 1942, a regulation that specifically targeted minorities (Aktar 2006). An extensive debate over the Emek Cinema campaign, which managed to achieve a great degree of visibility and popularity thanks to the participation of celebrities, took place on social media. Here we would like to acknowledge in particular the tweets of Ayda Erbal as a sustained line of criticism articulating the concerns we pursue here. One of her particularly pointed tweets cuts to the heart of the matter: “What Emek actually shows us is sharp difference in history. Where some people see art, for others lies the beginning of the annihilation of their race. One wishes that those protesting for Emek / Cercle d’Orient, as they raised their voices, could also speak about these.”¹²

Similar to Firat’s omission of the prior republican appropriation of this building from its Jewish owners, the reluctance to adequately foreground the appropriation of Gezi Park prior to the AKP’s assault neglects the genealogy of “urban transformation” in Istanbul.¹³ Limiting the claims that could spring from the struggle in Gezi Park to its current borders means neglecting crucial continuities in the

12. Although these tweets are no longer accessible on Erbal’s own Twitter feed, they have been retweeted by others. See, e.g., Ayayolculuk 2013.

13. For a detailed history of the appropriation of the Cercle d’Orient, see Tunçay 1999: 165; see also the documents provided by Gökhan Akçura (2010).

successive governments' regulation of the link between citizenship and property. In this sense, the assault against Gezi Park was the last link in a chain of appropriations that started in the late Ottoman period and continues until today. What "enables" the current AKP government to take the park away is not only the rise of neoliberal appropriation practices but also the way public commons came into existence in Turkey in the first place.

Our insistence here is thus a genealogical historicization of the seemingly "fixed" character of the state's designation of various parts of its national territory as public or private and an intervention against the naturalization of what gets designated as public. Such vigilance concerning historical exclusions and appropriations is necessary, to adapt Fernando Coronil's (2000: 352–53) explanation, for "discerning [the park's] present configuration and speculating about its future in light of its dark [national] past." It also has a bearing on oppositional practice: Even if the struggle against appropriation must be global, as anticapitalist social movements exhort us (*Express* 2013), why should this exempt us from accounting for the deep histories of the local and from analyzing the (Sunni-Turkish) ethnic privilege that continues to haunt the so-called public character of public commons?

Toward a Joint Chronology of Property and Citizenship

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Turkish republican government adopted various laws concerning minorities and what remained of their property. The previous, Ottoman government, led by the political party the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti; CUP), had already issued, on the heels of the Armenian genocide, a provisional version of what would subsequently become consolidated by the republican government as the *emval-i metruke kanunları*, or "abandoned property laws." This set of laws stipulated that all "abandoned" properties would automatically be turned over to the Treasury. The republic also promised regulations providing for the restoration of properties to their original owners should they return to Turkey (Polatel 2009: 116–19). However, at the 1923 Lausanne Conference, İsmet İnönü, then the prime minister and the official representing Turkey, allowed no discussion of the mass return of Armenian refugees, arguing that such a return would constitute a national security threat. Turkey was theoretically bound by the Lausanne Treaty to ensure that properties confiscated during both the Ottoman and republican periods were returned to their owners, the deported citizens. However, since the Armenians who had to leave the Ottoman Empire without passports did not have permission to return to Turkey, in practice the possibility of restoration was never fulfilled

(ibid.: 119). Finally, despite such provisions that ostensibly enabled the reacquisition of property by owners according to guidelines to be determined later by the government, with the owners either killed or banished, it was nearly impossible that any effective action could be taken through power of attorney. According to historians of the period, the Turkish authorities' claim of "putting Armenian property under protection" was merely a legal front to legitimize permanent confiscation (Akçam and Kurt 2012; Der Mateossian 2011; Onaran 2010; Tachjian 2006; Üngör and Polatel 2011).

Furthermore, the appropriation of Armenian property and the *emval-i metruke* laws designed to legitimize this appropriation would mark one of many key continuities between the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. These laws were, according to Taner Akçam and Ümit Kurt (2012: 13), a "structural element of the genocide and continue to constitute the essence of the republican legal system." Drawing on Akçam and Kurt's analysis, we propose that this structural element of genocide, namely, the "institutionalized erasure of Christian-Armenian presence" (ibid.), also through the erasure of property ownership, is a particular mode of what Elizabeth A. Povinelli calls the "governance of the prior." In a recent book, Povinelli looks at how the very materiality of indigenous land poses a problem for purported national homogeneity. "Dispossession is not a historical event but an ongoing process," she writes (Povinelli 2011: 35). In this proposal for "an alternative glossary for late liberalism" (ibid.: 29–30), Povinelli foregrounds the concept of "governance of the prior." Unlike Benedict Anderson's (1991) famous formulation of "homogeneous national time," which does not adequately address how minority difference is either erased or tamed in the construction of the national public, chronological time marks difference within the presupposed homogeneity of the nation by explaining the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences between the citizens in temporal terms. Emphasizing the disjuncture between homogeneous national time and chronological time, Povinelli draws our attention to the presence of the "prior" in several national settings. With the establishment of a nation-state, what happens to people, redefined as minority populations, living on land newly designated as national sovereign territory? Whose claims receive "priority"?

The extensive scholarship on nationalism has demonstrated that while homogeneity is certainly an aspiration of nation-states, it is the governance of difference that every nation-state most zealously takes on in different ways toward putative homogeneity. Various scholars have noted that nationalism does not emerge primarily as a new political imaginary of "homogeneous peoplehood" (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983) within the boundaries of the nation-state but is rather a partic-

ular, carefully calculated mode of regulating minority difference—whether religious, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural (Brown 2006; Chatterjee 1993; Markell 2003; Mufti 2007; Williams 1991). Povinelli takes our understanding of the production of unity under nationalism to another level by analyzing belonging beyond the cultural and the national and, instead, through its engenderment in material possessions. A crucial third level has been added to studies of the relationship between nationalism and the construction of putative homogeneity by those historians who probe the links between the Armenian genocide and property: belonging is secured not just through acts of homogenization, or the regulation of difference, but also through the redistribution of land and (il)legal property transfers. Considering these three levels in the creation of a national citizenry simultaneously, we could thus assert that the social engineering undertaken by the late Ottoman government and the founders of the early Turkish Republic involved (1) the expulsion and annihilation of a multiethnic, multireligious population (Çağaptay 2009: 150–59; Dündar 2008; Keyder 2004) to literally homogenize the population; (2) the regulation of the remaining difference through limited legal and cultural recognition and constant surveillance of minorities (Özgül 2014; Erbal and Suciyan 2011); and, finally, most relevant to our purposes here, (3) the dispossession of non-Muslim, non-Turkish property (Akçam 2008; Akçam and Kurt 2012; Keyder 1987). What's more, dispossession went hand in hand with reassignment of property to Muslim immigrants, a fourth and final layer that we address in the last section. But first we need to explore the obverse of the systematic confiscation of minority property by the state: the sense of entitlement and ownership that the majority of citizens in Turkey unquestioningly assume today.

In an introduction to the Turkish translation of the 2013 book by Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier, *La Turquie et le fantôme arménien: Sur le traces du genocide (Turkey and the Armenian Ghost: On the Trail of the Genocide)* the historian Akçam (2014: 9) ponders yet again the key question that he has been writing about for two decades: “How is it that we, Turks, continue to deny the genocide?” After stating the inadequacy of both the materialist explanation (the fear of having to return the property on which much of the wealth of the nation is founded) and the idealist explanation (that acknowledging genocide would mean acknowledging the continuity between the empire and the republic and thus denigrating the founding heroes of the Turkish Republic), Akçam goes on to locate the answer at what he calls a deeper, more existential level: “To acknowledge 1915 is to acknowledge the existence of ‘them,’ the Christians, on this soil, which is virtually to announce our own nonexistence. Because we owe our existence to their nonexistence” (ibid.: 11).

The inclusive *we* deployed here is, of course, a strategic choice: Akçam knows too well that there are Turkish individuals, including himself, who openly pronounce the word *genocide* and work toward its recognition. Nonetheless, he insists on the collective *we* to emphasize the sense of a majority public: *a* public, to refer back to Warner's classification, but one that passes for *the* public.

The sense of a public gathered around an alternative communicative reality premised on the annihilation of Christians (and the disavowal of this annihilation) constitutes a peculiar twist on Warner's (2002: 54) characterization of a feature common to all three categories of public: "Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members." The cognitive quality of this attention, according to Warner, is not as important as what he calls "the mere fact of active uptake" (ibid.). The uptake that is relevant to the sense of a public we discuss here, a public that encompasses—albeit to different degrees—both the *we* of the majority public Akçam describes and the *we* of Gezi we depicted, involves the active uptake of a communicative reality built around the black hole Akçam identifies: in the former instance, its erasure; in the latter, its evasion. In other words, there is a common denominator to an otherwise politically and ethnically heterogeneous public: the "active uptake" of the disavowal of the differential property regime on which modern Turkey was founded and continues to rest. As a piece of confiscated property, Gezi Park is significant for the ways it reveals a geography marked by ghostly presences.

These ghostly presences are the subject of Yael Navaro-Yashin's book *The Make-Believe Space* (2012). While Povinelli (2011) tackles a settler colony/state, namely, Australia, we suggest that her exploration of the "governance of the prior" is relevant for Turkey, especially when coupled with Navaro-Yashin's formulation of the relation between the phantomic and the phantasmatic in northern Cyprus. Navaro-Yashin (2012: 13–17) defines the *phantasmatic* as those spaces of make-believe, constructed out of the ideological, material, and institutional erasure of previous presences. In the case of reoccupied houses and the objects taken from the Greeks by the invading Turkish army in northern Cyprus, Navaro-Yashin demonstrates how the phantomic quality of such objects—that is, their uncanny, ghostly presence—constantly haunts the lives of the Turkish people who now live in these houses and who use these objects. This inevitable everyday interaction with looted objects, according to Navaro-Yashin's evocative analysis, ruptures on a daily basis the phantasmatic, as those who now occupy the houses of the former Cypriot residents cannot but reflect on the owners of the family antiques or intimate objects they come upon, for example, in the chests of drawers in their

new residence. Inspired by Navaro-Yashin but with a twist, we suggest that in the Turkish context, where the phantasmatic—in this case, denial of genocide and property confiscation—is so absolute, the phantomic quality that Navaro-Yashin so eloquently describes almost disappears. This is also because, going back to Povinelli (2011: 35), there is “an ever-decreasing moral weight as the event of dis-possession recedes into historical time.” Or, when the phantomic does appear, as in the flickering reminders that Gezi was once an Armenian cemetery, the phantomic echo is immediately domesticated: the demand for recognition is reduced to being a demand about the park and the now, rather than one simultaneously about the cemetery and the past.

One could argue that all possession is haunted, following Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s rejoinder “Property is theft!” But there are different levels of appropriation, differences that tend to get erased in the framing of the Gezi occupation as a revolt against neoliberalism and as the reclamation of public commons. Such limited appropriations of the Marxist analysis of property and ownership, stripped as they are of history and of the difference of the appropriation enacted by foundational state violence, also impede the imagination of haunting and of the ghostly presences of Gezi Park. In that, they become complicit in the phantasmatic erasure of the ruins that haunt it. Such a limited understanding of reclaiming public commons also partakes, even if unwittingly, in the architect Prost’s trivialization of the ruined space as mere “old remains.” This phantasmatic erasure bleeds into private property, as we next elaborate through a specific case that recently captured the art scene in Turkey.

Hospitality

On April 25, 2013, the day after the April 24 commemoration that marks the beginning of the Armenian genocide, Istanbul Tütün Deposu, a cultural center and exhibition space that curates works of art that often have explicit politically dissident content, hosted the opening of an exhibit titled *Bearing Witness to the Lost History of an Armenian Family*. As the exhibit’s website describes:

This exhibition tells the story of the Dildilian family, whose members worked as photographers primarily in the cities of Sivas, Merzifon, and Samsun. The backdrop of the story, which starts in 1872 and ends in 1923, consists of a war that ravaged the world and a collapsing empire in death throes. At the center of the story is an agonized nation crushed and annihilated under this collapse. The exhibition focuses on a painful process,

which resulted in the violent eradication of Armenians from their 2,500-year old homeland. (Depo 2016)

The exhibit consisted of various photographs and family narratives, contributed by surviving members of the Dildilian family. But it was Armen Marsoobian, a professor of philosophy and the grandson of genocide survivor Tsoilag Dildilian, who pieced everything into a coherent whole, complementing these original sources with various archival material and the diaries of missionaries.

The artistic and historical value of the exhibition is without dispute. But we would like to turn a critical lens on how the exhibition circulated in public discourse. There was ample praise for the exhibit for what it revealed about the dark history of the republic and for enabling a discussion of obscured histories.¹⁴ An article on the exhibit published in the daily *Taraf* was lauded for “its unapologetic use of the word *soykırım*—genocide—without speech-marks or a qualifier such as ‘so-called’” (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 2013).¹⁵

That the use of the term *genocide* without qualifiers becomes a noteworthy event in and of itself attests to the continued hegemony of genocide denialism in Turkey.¹⁶ But here we would like to probe another, unmentioned theme in the exhibition coverage. Whether or not the word *genocide* appeared, coverage emphasized the hospitality shown by the current residents of the house, namely, the Kozlu family, to the surviving grandchildren when they visited their hometown, Merzifon, for the first time. The *Taraf* article, particularly enthusiastic in praising the value of this event for encouraging public dialogue, stated: “Over the course of exchanges during these two years, they [the Dildilian family members] became friends with the Kozlu family, Merzifon residents and the house’s current residents. And whenever the Dildilian family came to the province, Remziye and Kemal Kozlu opened their doors to them, and helped them find the traces of their family” (Halis 2013).

In addition to underscoring the helpfulness of the current residents of the house, which had once been inhabited by the Marsoobian family—the very family, we note once again, that was to be subsequently decimated by the genocide—coverage

14. Such appraisal marked the panel discussion following the exhibition opening, www.depoistanbul.net/tr/activites_detail.asp?ac=88.

15. For a critical look at the limits of the AKP’s policies of religious freedom regarding Islamized Armenians’ conversions, see Özgül 2014.

16. The politics of naming the genocide has been systematically examined by a handful of scholars. See Akçam 2008, Dadrian 1995, Göçek 2014, Nichanian 2003, and Suny and Göçek 2011.

of the exhibition took pains to note that Armen Marsoobian “personally requests neither family property, nor compensation nor anything tangible at all” (ibid.). A few sentences further, the article’s author stated her own interpretation: “Tsolag saved his household but he could not save the members of his large family outside of Merzifon. However, in Merzifon he did hide 18 Armenian youth for 2 years in his cellar. These 18 people did not see the sun for 2 years” (ibid.).

The article offers a chillingly easy juxtaposition. We have a testimony by Marsoobian about his grandfather, a genocide survivor who hid other victims in his cellar for many years to save them from death. And one sentence earlier in the interview, we are told of the support and hospitality shown to Marsoobian by the current residents of the very house where all of this took place, the house that was subsequently “transferred” to these current, hospitable “owners.” We wish to ponder for a moment the discursive violence in the breathless transition from the narration of a personal testimony of genocide to the emphasis on the genial, cordial relations between the descendant of genocide and the current residents of the house that belongs/belonged to the survivor. This is not to cast doubt on the “niceness” of the family that now “owns” the house. But what does it mean that the descendant of a genocide survivor is depicted as being grateful for the help shown by those who inhabit the house that bore testimony to genocide and was subsequently confiscated? What is the interrelation between structural violence and personal responsibility, between historical injustice and contemporary awareness of that injustice? We have to inquire into that relationship, if we are not to reproduce, over and over again, the discursive violence that such utterances enact: a story of homecoming, one that takes place after an unspoken departure, and a story told with an emphasis on hospitality, as if these two acts could ever be of equal proportion.

A final point we note is the repeated emphasis in the coverage of the exhibition on Marsoobian’s lack of demands — neither for “family property” nor “compensation nor anything tangible at all.” This persistent informing of the public of Marsoobian’s intentions is a strategic, performative act to attest to the “pure” intentions of the survivors. We note, this time, the injustice and the compromise. What if during his visit Marsoobian in fact asked the inhabitants whether they ever wondered who owned the house into which they had settled? Should that change the “purity” of his intentions? What if other survivors in the family decide to voice a political and legal demand for the restitution of property that had “legally” been usurped from them by the Turkish state? Instead, the abstention from demands is presented as a commendable gesture that absolves the survivor of any ulterior motive. An exhibition that engenders these accounts is lauded as breaking taboos.

But, in fact, the appropriation of Marsoobian's journey and the exhibit as a congenial story reveals the continuing symbolic and structural violence amid which genocide descendants continue to survive.

The impossibility of the encounter between the previous and current owners of what used to be Armenian property that we analyze here has been depicted in another medium by the Armenian artist Aret Gıdır, who has been drawing caricatures for the Armenian-Turkish weekly *Agos* in his column titled "Since 1915." The column tackles multiple historical facets of the genocide and its manifestations in contemporary cultural and political life in Turkey. In one particular work (see fig. 5), Gıdır depicts a dialogue between an Armenian visitor (a returnee, perhaps?), with a camera hanging from his neck, and a home owner, whose house was constructed with the stones of what used to be an Armenian church, with the unmistakable Armenian figures and letters on its facade still visible. The local home owner is polite enough in his response to the visitor's query, referring to the latter as "Sir," and, judging by his bodily posture, uncomfortable under the weight of this encounter. The current owner's utterance is the classic and ultimate gesture of hospitality in Turkey: "Come drink our tea." In a spirit that relates

public space (church) to private property (home), the cleverness of the artistic expression lies in showing simultaneously the reality of unjust and unequal entitlements and the futile transformation of the resulting moral weight into the depoliticized language of "hospitality."

Literary critic and philosopher Marc Nichanian's (2003) brilliant rumination on the impossibility of narrating what he calls the "Catastrophe," the word that he insistently prefers to *genocide*, might offer one answer to why the violence of the



Figure 5 "Excuse me, there used to be an Armenian church around here." "We built our own house from that, sir . . . But here, come sit and drink our tea." Illustration by Aret Gıdır

encounter between Marsoobian and the Kozlu family goes unrecognized in the “mediated and mediatized recounts” within which the exhibition and its story circulates.¹⁷ In an analysis of Zabel Yesayan’s testimony of the April 1909 pogroms in Adana, a harbinger of the genocide that resulted in the deaths of thirty thousand Armenian residents, Nichanian notes Yesayan’s recurrent use of the term *ansahmaneli*, which translates literally as “infinite” but which, Nichanian proposes, Yesayan deploys to connote what is undefinable. For Nichanian, then, Yesayan’s effort to testify is heroic precisely in its recognition, even if between the lines, of the impossibility of bearing witness.

If Nichanian exposes in unflinching, uncompromising thoroughness the impossibility of bearing witness to the catastrophe, we simply wish to point to the impossibility of representing Marsoobian’s tale. Given the state of affairs, it does not actually matter whether the hosts, the new owners of the family house of Marsoobian, are genuine in their hospitality. What matters are the conditions under which and the compromises through which the tale of “the return” can be represented.

An Occluded Connection: Dispossessed Armenian Exiles and Resettled Turkish Migrants

That the new owners of the Dildilian family home are former migrants from the Balkans is no mere coincidence. Beneath this contemporary encounter between the dispossessed Armenian family and the immigrant family that now resides on what was once the former’s property, there lies a deeply seated connection. This connection, which constitutes the final layer in our exposition of the still largely occluded facets of the relationship between property and citizenship in Turkey, concerns the systematic transfer of property from the displaced Armenian minority to primarily Muslim Turkish migrants from the Balkans.

The particular policy of property transfer needs to be situated within the settlement policies of the late Ottoman Empire and, in particular, those of the CUP, the former opposition party that consolidated its rule between 1913 and 1918 and signed off on the Armenian genocide. Until the rule of Abdülhamid II, the Ottoman Empire did not distinguish much among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, in the sense that the empire considered quantitative strength as military strength in and of itself. This was to change dramatically with Abdülhamid, who stated: “The times when we embraced those of foreign religions as if we were sticking splin-

17. We thank the anonymous reviewer for this apt formulation of the recounts.

ters into our own skin are long past. Within our state borders, we can only accept those who are of our own nationality and who share the same religious beliefs” (quoted in Dündar 2001: 51; translation ours). This changing vision of who could be included within the state’s borders would also have strong repercussions for nomadic populations and the Kurds, these latter targeted for assimilation, but more relevant for our purposes here are those Muslim populations who had been settled in strategic boundary points during the expansionist phases of the empire, only to be forced to flee as the territories were lost first to the Russian Empire and then later to various emerging nation-states in the Balkans (Altuğ 1991; Kasaba 1998; Tekeli 1990). The following figures give an indication of the scope of these forced migrations from the nineteenth century onward: the Crimean migrations after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1828–29, and later between 1860 and 1864, adding up to 1.8 million of the returning Tatar migrants since the end of the eighteenth century (Karpas 1985); the Caucasian migrations between 1859 and 1879 of approximately 1.5 million people; and the more than 2 million people who fled from the Balkans to Anatolia, first after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78 and then later the Balkan War of 1912–13 (H. Eren 1993; Tekeli 1990). These retreating populations posed one of the biggest challenges to the empire in its declining phase. The migrants arriving after the Balkan wars were numerous enough, in the words of Talat Pasha, minister of internal affairs and one of the chief architects of the genocide, in a speech he delivered to Parliament in 1915, to “damage public order and discipline” (quoted in Dündar 2001: 34). The shrinking of borders and the waves of return migration from Crimea, the Caucasus, and the Balkans would both shape population policies (Kasaba 1998) and transform the empire’s Ottomanist ideology from one that, although not equally inclusive of all, still saw strength in numbers to one that was more exclusively ethnicist (Dündar 2001).

At least one of the reasons, then, for the expulsion and annihilation of a multi-ethnic, multireligious population (Çağaptay 2009: 150–59; Dündar 2008: 248–51; Keyder 2004; Öktem 2008) was finding the most desirable solution to the problem of arriving Muslim immigrants. The various laws concerning minorities and their (remaining) property that were issued in the immediate aftermath of the Armenian genocide contain the final crucial element that we wish to highlight in this history of the relationship between property and differential citizenship in Turkey: the laws were also meant to enable the transfer of property confiscated from those deemed minorities to those migrants deemed more desirable subjects of the emerging nation (Üngör and Polatel 2011).

The Turkish Muslim immigrant communities arriving from the lost territories of the empire, designated as *muhacir* in the older legal and local parlance, were

the primary recipients of the land appropriated from the displaced and destroyed non-Muslim communities. Legally, the very term *migrant* denoted—and indeed continues to denote in contemporary usage as well—“of Turkish origin and with ties to Turkish culture.”¹⁸ There was a further distinction made: *iskanlı* (settled) versus regular *göçmen* (migrant). *Iskanlı göçmen* referred to those who would be given property upon settlement. The legal term under which these migrants were included in the national body, *iskanlı göçmen*, signaled their symbolic as well as material incorporation. Therefore, the seemingly technical qualifier *iskanlı*, meaning “settled with property,” also indexes the submerged history of property and how the occlusion of the genealogy of property was enabled through legal codification.

The new policy of the Muslimization and Turkification of Anatolia called for using the villages evacuated by Armenians to settle not only Russian and Balkan *muhacir* but Arabs too (Dündar 2001: 92–104; also cited in Polatel 2009: 130–31). But the migrants from the Balkans seem to have been those most preferred by the late Ottoman government and the founders of the early Turkish Republic (Çağaptay 2014; Canefe 2002). The reason for this preference is complex. In part, it has to do with the Balkans being seen as the “heart of empire” and the fact that many of the top members of the CUP traced their roots back to the Balkans. It also had to do with the identification of the empire with the “West.”

Thus the experience of war and displacement from the former Ottoman territories had a key influence on the elimination of the Armenian population. As Mehmet Polatel (2009: 129) states, “The deportation law enacted on May 30th, 1915 and the secret order included the items which aimed to settle the immigrants in the abandoned properties.” Or, in the words of Raymond Kévorkian (2011: 204), in his definitive *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*: “The displacement of the [Armenian] deportees, albeit ‘temporary,’ was to make room for the *muhacir*. One can only conclude that, as those who wrote the law saw matters, such departures were ‘definitive.’” It was not just property but also “insignificant goods” (*eşya-yı hasise*) that were to be redistributed: a telegram that was sent from the Ministry of the Interior to the governor of Kale-i Sultaniye in 1916, for example, dictated that the insignificant goods that belonged to the Armenians deported from Kale (Çanakkale) should be distributed to the Muslim immigrants (BOA/Ş FR, 69/252, quoted in Polatel 2009: 133). Internal affairs minister Talat Pasha’s very own records indicate that “in 1915, 20,545 buildings, 267,536 acres of

18. For a discussion of the political repercussions of the legal privilege accorded to Balkan migrants in relation to rights struggles, see Parla 2011.

land, 76,942 acres of vineyards, 703,941 acres of olive groves, and 4,573 acres of mulberry gardens were allocated to Muslim settlers out of the assets seized from the Armenians” (quoted in Bardakçı 2008: 91–103).

Neither was this allocation of property to immigrants based purely on “need.” Kurds who were equally in need of accommodation after they were forced to leave their villages following the Seyh Sait rebellion of 1925 were not allowed to receive Armenian properties: “If the Armenian abandoned lands in which the Turkish immigrants were settled were occupied by Kurdish people, these lands would be evacuated and Kurds would be sent to their former places” (Polatel 2009: 153–54). Similar to what Polatel’s sources indicate, Kévorkian (2011: 205–6) shows that turning the Armenians’ homes over to *muhacir* went hand in hand with both the Ottoman and Republican objectives of nationalizing the economy and transferring Armenian capital to Muslim entrepreneurs in both periods. He cites several articles in the decrees that allocate “abandoned” Armenian properties to Muslim immigrants (*muhacir*) from several parts of the empire soon after the property rights of Armenians are “secured,” and he also notes that legal terms and definitions such as “temporary” were employed to hide the fact that the law was aimed at ensuring the erasure of the Armenian population and other signs of its existence on the now Turkish soil.

Finally, we want to note that the occluded history of the relationship among citizenship, property, and public culture in Turkey is not adequately confronted even in some of the more critical recent historiographies. Even those who acknowledge the crimes committed against Armenians by the government in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire refer to these atrocities as if there exists a moral correspondence between, on the one hand, the violence suffered by the victims of the Armenian genocide and, on the other hand, the plight of the Muslim population in the Balkan territories lost by the Ottoman Empire.

Cruder manifestations of such attempts to claim “justness” through referencing “mutual injustice” are rampant in Turkish popular history as well as in Turkey’s recent official acknowledgment of “mutual pain,” an ideologically strategic step giving subtler shape to genocide denial. Dire and perilous as such attempts are, they are not what we are concerned with here. Rather, we refer to scholarship that goes against the grain of established nationalist historiography but still constructs a moral correspondence between the systematic expropriation of Armenian and other minority land and property at the turn of the twentieth century and its subsequent transfer to the refugees fleeing the territories lost by the Ottoman Empire. Such an equivalence has the effect, wittingly or not, of partially exonerating the genocide committed by the CUP and the continuation of genocidal vio-

lence through, among other things, legalization of property appropriation under the Turkish Republic.

In Nurcan Özgür's (2012: 203) recent essay on the forced migrants of modern Turkey, for example, the equivalence between the suffering of Balkan Muslims and Anatolian Armenians is established point-blank: "The Balkan Wars, which resulted in the mass deportations and extensive massacres of the Balkan Muslims and Anatolian Armenians, constitute the biggest trauma in the migration memory of the region." But Dündar's (2001) otherwise extremely important and thorough account of the migration and settlement policies of the CUP in the Turkification of Anatolia is a far subtler case in point. Although a much-needed historiography that situates settlement policy during the late empire within the larger history of the empire and notes continuities with the republic, the account is nonetheless checkered with instances of extenuating explanations of state injustice toward Armenians through allusions to the injustice experienced by Balkan refugees. What we call the implicit moral economy of asserting justice through referencing mutual injustice is carried out through two primary discursive strategies.

The first is the employment of two different kinds of language: technical terms for the genocidal violence perpetrated against Armenians by the Ottoman Republic and compassionate, emotionally evocative terms for the violence suffered by the Muslim Turkish immigrants. Throughout the text, genocide and property confiscation are described in neutral-sounding words: "allocation," "protection of Armenian abandoned property"; "*sevk* [dispatch, shipping] of Armenians"; and "taking away of Armenians from the battlefield" (ibid.: 64, 63, 213).

We note Dündar's choice of words: "taken away" rather than "deported" or "massacred"; or the legally neutral "brought under state protection" rather than "confiscated"; or, again, the more benign "allocation" rather than "forcible transfer through dispossession." One may argue that this is the language of Turkish law itself, that these are the legal words used to describe the practice. However, since Dündar makes no effort to distinguish his own language from that of (Turkish) law, he ends up replicating and perpetuating the language of the sovereign.

Regarding the transfer of property previously owned by Armenians to the arriving migrants, for example, Dündar writes: "It was not just the Armenians or Greeks, but also those individuals who belonged to the Bulgarian or Assyrian communities whose properties were either taken under protection or distributed to immigrants so as to alleviate, even if partially, the squalor [*sefalet*] of the immigrants and refugees. Rather than being taken over by the resident Muslim population, it was

more beneficial that the properties in question were allocated to those immigrants and refugees in such a state of wretchedness [*perişan*]” (ibid.: 215; translation ours). The second discursive strategy resides in the juxtaposition enacted in this quotation. When the appropriation of property from a decimated population is framed as an act of redistribution, it appears to be a less than ideal but nonetheless comparatively better—and perhaps even necessary—remedy for the suffering of the ethnically Turkish immigrants. Whether these discursive strategies are intentional and conscious is beside the point. The effect is a moral economy of justice that minimizes the suffering of one community by emphasizing the suffering of another.

We want to underscore the significance of the largely occluded connection between exiled and massacred Armenians and the returning Turkish Muslim immigrants by revisiting Povinelli’s (2011) argument against exclusive emphasis on the governance of difference and for emphasis on the governance of the prior. Such an argument moves away from an exclusive focus on the rights of citizens and toward the positing of an imagined chronology of the occupation of national territory—a national chronology that creates, maintains, and governs public property. Sunni Muslim Turks, in this imagined chronology, are established as the rightful owners of Turkish national territory. It is precisely the threat to the sanctity of this chronology that accounts for the outrage of an MP from the center-left People’s Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or CHP) in reaction to the articles of the new Law on Foundations (No. 5737) regarding the improvement of the conditions of non-Muslim minority foundations proposed by the AKP government on the heels of European Union–led legal reform. The CHP MP calls it “Agop’s law,” *Agop* being deployed as the quintessential ethnic-Armenian male name in Turkey. He positions the minority property rights embedded in the proposed law against what he then calls—in contradistinction to the individualized “Agop”—the “people’s interests.” His words perfectly epitomize the governance of difference through, simultaneously, the majority-minority duality and the property regime in Turkey: “If we cannot discuss the people’s concern, what else is there to discuss? First, let us discuss the people’s concerns, then we can talk about Agop’s law” (*TBMM Tutanak Dergisi* 2006: 56; translation ours).¹⁹

19. Halkın sorununu görüşemezsek neyi görüşeceğiz? Onları görüşelim, arkasından da Agop yasasını görüşürüz.

Conclusion

Given the discomfort that many progressive and leftist activists in contemporary Turkey have voiced in various public forums with regard to what they perceive as an overemphasis on property and ethnic identity, we anticipate a similar unease with what might be viewed as the politically detrimental consequences of our analysis in this article. Why tarnish an already vulnerable dissident movement in Turkey with an ethnicist focus? Less pragmatically, by defending minority property, why turn away from a commitment to the Marxist dictum that all private property is fundamentally theft?²⁰ Such concern with what is perceived as an unnecessary re-ethnicization of an issue of class under neoliberalism is indeed one that needs to be reckoned with.

We have attempted in this article to challenge the very assumption in these questions. We have asked, instead, why label a focus on the history of the confiscation of Armenian property as bringing “ethnicity” back? We believe that, without a recognition of the continuing existence of ethnic privilege that constitutes the basis of claims to urban communal and private property and of the foundational violence against ethnic minorities, any critique of current citizenship practices in Turkey is bound to be a limited critique of neoliberal authoritarianism and the current government. We thus insist that it is time that the Gezi protests, which indeed became a space of convergence across various divides, also constitute a critical space from which to discuss the long-standing problems of (ethnic) privilege that constitute the basis of citizenship as well as the ways in which ethnic privilege continues to haunt the so-called public character of public commons. This “prior” violence allowed the Turkish state to commit and legitimize numerous other acts of exclusion, from the great population exchange between Greece and Turkey, to the current civil war with the Kurdish minority, to the gentrification of various neighborhoods of Istanbul today.

Hence the significance of the park, hence the significance of the demand for retribution, hence the necessity of retaining the focus on ethnicity in relation to the question of property. Hence our insistence on a sober genealogical account that traces the effects of the past on our contemporary struggles for a more inclusionary and equal Turkish citizenship and on the need for a confrontation with the

20. We would like to acknowledge the apt formulation to this effect of Erdem Kayserilioğlu, a participant of the graduate seminar that Ayşe Parla teaches at Sabancı University, who when we discussed an early version of this article voiced concern with what he saw as the danger of “recalling or bringing back in [essentialized] ethnic communities through the question of property.”

implicit privileges that citizens who can claim Turkish ethnicity continue to rely on. Not only the current inhabitants' "ownership" of the house that once belonged to the Dildilian family but also our own reclaiming of Gezi Park is burdened with the unacknowledged legacy of genocide. Perhaps all critical historiography and anticapitalist occupy movements in Turkey have to (re)start in the graveyards.

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Ayşe Parla is an associate professor of anthropology at Sabancı University and a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, for 2016–2017, where she will be completing her book manuscript, titled "Anxious Hope: Bulgarian-Turkish Labor Migrants, Ethnic Privilege, and Everyday Law."

Ceren Özgül is a recipient of Wenner-Gren's Hunt Fellowship and a visiting scholar at New York University's Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, where she is revising her book manuscript "The Return: Armenian Conversions, Secularism, and Law in Turkey" for publication.