Stories and narratives in contentious politics
Marc Herzog | British Institute at Ankara

This article will summarise a piece of research that is currently in progress, the aim of which is to examine the presence of particular narrative groupings in cycles of contentious politics in Turkey, Bulgaria and Russia over the period of 2011 to 2013, with the Istanbul Gezi Park summer protests as the main focus. The current working paper results from a panel titled 'Radicalization and transformation in southeastern Europe: prospects and predicaments', organised by Leonidas Karakatsanis and myself at the 2014 Political Studies Association conference held in Manchester.

For the purposes of this paper, I wanted to apply the methodological approach of Eric Selbin, an American political scientist, whose work has involved constructing a set of 'standard stories' of revolution that through historical research he found recurring across multiple instances throughout time and space. In Selbin's words:

For all the myriad variations, it is possible to discern a surprisingly timeless story told and retold, of brave, valiant, and committed people, often youth, who, realizing the gross inequities of their situation, rise up to demand freedom or equality or justice (Selbin 2010: 17).

In that sense, as Solinger, Fox and Irani (2008) state with regard to stories and narratives, they can constitute important, transformational tools to struggle against unjust status quos and express the possibility of alternative social realities. Thus, the experimental rationale of the paper is to apply Selbin's approach in order to identify a similar set of 'standard stories' in the contentious politics across the three regions mentioned above.

Turkey's Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013 and the paper's other cases have been included in what's been seen as a new wave of global contentious politics similar to the '1968 protests' or Eastern Europe's 1989 'revolutions'. Biekart and Fowler (2013) term this wave 'Activisms 2010+', capturing a wide geography of disparate cases over the last five years, from the US Occupy movement, to the Indignado protests, to the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, to protests in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Russia, among others.

Narratives in protests and social movements
Narratives and stories are used here as interchangeable terms and understood as discursive structures that require a plot structure tying the order of events together sequentially in terms of cause and effect, a particular perspective of narration and an element of indeterminacy or ambiguity that draws in the audience's interpretive faculties (Christensen 2011: 4–5). Research on the role of narratives and stories in social movements only began in the last two decades, as movements have also increasingly been interpreted in terms of 'collectively constructed and shared meanings, interpretations, rituals, and identities'. Castells (2013) argues that one of the fundamental criteria for overcoming fear and indifference, and becoming mobilised, is the acquisition of a sense of 'togetherness' with other like-minded people. Narratives and story-telling are essential here in creating and diffusing shared meanings and understandings among demonstrators or nascent protest movements and establishing a collective communal identity.

Every protest cycle and emerging protest movement constitutes its own unique tapestry, woven out of highly localised contexts where 'tradition and group-knowledge' constitute invaluable tools to embed events in narratives that can resonate with diverse audiences. Practices of 'bricolage', 'translation' and 'reinvention', merging different themes, images and symbols together in a meaningful way, and the appropriation of elements, images and symbols from other cases are other important resources.

A key element characterising the movements within the contemporary 'Activisms 2010+' cycle of contentious politics has been the intensive use of information and communication technologies. The global growth in the use of information-communication technologies over the past two decades, especially of the internet, has significantly facilitated social mobilisation, communication and the exchange of ideas, images, symbols and themes across diverse geographies of contentious politics.

'Mass self-communication' platforms like Facebook or Twitter, for instance, can provide organisational and mobilisational capacities that are simultaneously rooted in particular geographic imaginations – Istanbul's Gezi Park for instance – and globally 'multi-sited'. This allows emerging protest movements to remain relatively non-hierarchical and fluid, and furthers the pluralisation of stories and narratives that emerge and are exchanged. Thus, it is perhaps easier than ever before to 'de-nationalise' narratives of protests and discern common narratives, as Selbin does in his work on stories of revolution.

In relation to the cases of contentious politics in Turkey, Bulgaria and Russia, by analysing the dynamics of the protests as well as the language and images used, I have constructed three particular narrative groupings. These are roughly equivalent to the themes of dignity, democracy and social justice that Biekart and Fowler (2013) identify as being key within the 'Activisms 2010+' cycle.

1. Narratives of popular struggle to reclaim public space and voice.
2. Narratives of popular struggle against political injustice and authoritarianism.
3. Narratives of popular struggle against socio-economic injustice.

The first narrative group revolves around the retaking or reclaiming of public spaces by social collectivities, often presenting themselves and/or seen as 'the people', 'the public' or 'civil society'. This narrative group focuses on the expression, assertion and celebration of agency and public visibility through demonstrations at or occupations of particular spaces. This enacts collective solidarity and togetherness, allowing shared narratives of identity and causes to strengthen themselves around the protests. This retaking is frequently presented as having been preceded by a long period of dormancy and silent suffering until the crossing of a threshold. Similarly, Glasius and Pleyers (2013: 560) focus on themes of dignity as people strive to gain civic visibility through the public performance of citizenship. This narrative group is also entwined with perceptions of political and social disempowerment and injustice.

The two other narrative groupings that I posit focus on the forms of injustice against which the protests are directed, and are inter-related within themselves and with the first narrative grouping. The narrative group focusing on resistance towards political authoritarianism and political injustice has a dual dimension in what it calls for and against. The narrative plots collective resistance against forms of authoritarianism as well as the defence of democratic social and political values and practices. The third narrative grouping addresses socio-economic forms of injustice, often linked to the damage and dislocation of neoliberal globalisation and the promotion of fairer alternative forms of economic governance.

Having briefly outlined the theoretical context and introduced the schema of the narrative groups I have established, I would like to shift to the main case of Turkey. During the summer of 2013, social media constituted a vital tool of communication, information dissemination and mobilisation, since the mainstream media ignored much of the Gezi Park protests. New York University's social media and political participation unit registered 22 million tweets in the first 12 days of the protests, with hashtags like #occupygezi, #direngeziparki and #geziparki.

When we begin to look at the Gezi Park protests through the lens of the first narrative group, we see that the heterogeneity and diversity of participants and groups (Kemalists, Kurdish groups, anarchists, anti-capitalist Muslims, feminists, rival football supporters, nationalists, environmentalists, LGBT activists) facilitated the expression of this narrative as emanating from the 'people' or 'civil society'. The narrative's spatial imagination was linked to Istanbul's geography, especially Taksim Square and Gezi Park, the dominant symbolic sites through which the assertion of a public voice was articulated.

Although the protests first centred on preventing the demolition of Istanbul's Gezi Park, the focus quickly shifted to a broader narrative of resistance against perceptions of encroaching political authoritarianism and the defence of democratic freedoms and civil liberties, fitting into the second narrative grouping outlined above. This is a common development in protest cycles, and one that the social movement scholar Della Porta refers to as 'the cognitive expansion of protest claims' (2014: 32).

Unlike the anti-austerity movements within the 'Activisms 2010+' cycle, the Gezi Park protests were not primarily concerned with socio-economic grievances or injustices, since Turkey was not as badly affected by the 2008 financial crisis as other countries. However, narratives of resistance to socio-economic and environmental injustices were present, especially in the early period of the protests which involved themes of neoliberal economic governance in contemporary Turkey, specifically the destruction of Gezi Park. These narratives concentrated on state-led campaigns of gentrification and the sense that public spaces were regarded only as privatisable assets by the government and related business interests, a theme that also links this narrative to that on political injustice.

In this brief article, I argue, in a similar way to Selbin, that it might be possible to discern broad narrative groupings across time and space in the context of contentious politics. Stories, narratives and their telling are instrumental in this context, in creating a social sense of togetherness and community, and in allowing movements to grow and sustain themselves through time. Although there is not space here to focus on the other case studies, the proposed schema of narratives of retaking/reclaiming public space, of struggles against political injustice and of socio-economic injustice can be used as a useful lens to examine diverse protests and protest movements, and to situate them against one another in the stories they disseminate.

References
Biekart, K. and Fowler, A. 2013: 'Transforming Activisms 2010+: exploring ways and waves' *Development and Change* 44.3: 527–46
Castells, M. 2013: *Networks of Hope and Outrage*. Cambridge
Christensen, J. 2011: 'Narrative and social movements' in *Theories of Social Movements*. Ipswich MA: 3–13
Della Porta, D. 2014: *Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*. Oxford
Glasius, M. and Pleyers, G. 2013: 'The global moment of 2011: democracy, social justice and dignity' *Development and Change* 44.3: 547–67
Polletta, F. 2006: *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago
Selbin, E. 2010: *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story*. London
Solinger, R., Fox, M. and Irani, K. 2008: 'Introduction' in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*. New York: 1–11