
Media, activism and the new political: ‘Istanbul conversations’ on new media and left politics

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Held in October 2013, ‘Istanbul Conversations’ was the first public event organized by the Social Science Research Council’s Transregional Virtual Research Initiative (TVRI) on media, activism, and the new political. The TVRI brings together scholars from a range of disciplines and world regions to examine the interrelationship of media and politics within and across ‘InterAsia’, a spatially and historically networked expanse stretching from the Middle East through East Asia.

In recent years there has been much interest in media and activism, focusing primarily on the role of new media and its potential to mobilize social and political change. For the most part, current discussions explore the mediated dynamics of mass mobilization and collective action. Thus, a central question concerns how the new networks of mobile, social and digital media alter capabilities of physical amassment and amplification – the spontaneous scaling up of conversion of individuals into collective, visible, and audible

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public presences – and whether and how they can unsettle and even overturn established political orders. Moving beyond these investigations of the mechanics of mediated social mobilization, TVRI scholars seek to better understand the broader range of instances when media are politically productive, taking into account how everyday life is transformed into political action in these newly mediated environments, and the resulting new meanings of politics and the political that obtain in the present conjuncture. Through a dialogue across three different world regions – India, China, and the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region – with divergent institutional and political landscapes, and where the historical trajectories and ecologies of media have taken quite different routes and forms, this research initiative takes a comparative approach to examining how extant structures, agents, practices, and the very horizons of politics in the initial decades of the 21st century have been transformed within and across these regions.

To begin the discussion, the TVRI hosted a public forum in Istanbul, where the biennial InterAsia international conference (Inter-Asian Connections IV), was taking place. Moderated by three scholars involved with the TVRI project, this forum involved six scholar-activists who were invited to reflect on the genealogies of ‘mediated activism’ across China, Turkey, Egypt, and India. More broadly, these scholar-activists were asked to situate the idea of newness that suffuses discussions of politics and formations of the ‘new global left’ in wider social historical processes and formations. This report is an edited transcript of this roundtable discussion.

The first section, moderated by Tarik Sabry and Sune Haugbolle, focuses on genealogies of activism and formations of the ‘left’ in relation to current social and political transitions. Sabry and Haugbolle are interested in thinking through the issue of generational renewal when it comes to leftist politics and thought, and whether we can discern a new ‘structure of feeling’ that is markedly different from earlier generations of the political left. Aswin Punathambekar picks up this thread in the second section and asks panelists to reflect on how changes in the media landscape relate to emergent and quite novel forms of protest, activism, and the formation of leftist thought collectives.

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Panelists: Murat Akser (University of Ulster, UK), Harun Ercan (Binghamton University, USA), Sherene Seikaly (The American University at Cairo, Egypt), Bassam Haddad (George Mason University, USA), Lawrence Liang (Alternative Law Forum, India), and Jack Qiu (Chinese University of Hong Kong, China).

Rethinking the global left: between rupture and historical continuity

Tarik Sabry: Are the recent global protest movements and the discursive/affective cultural practices they bring with them evidence of a new historical moment, a global *Zeitgeist* led by a new *historical* generation? Who is this generation? Is it part of a coherent left? How different is its ‘structure of feeling’ and experience from the generations and formations of the political left that preceded it? Are we witnessing a radical break

with the past (both culturally and politically) or are the unfolding events best contextualized within frames of continuous historical struggles?

Murat Akser: The intellectual background for the recent social and political movements in Turkey can be traced to the resistance and left-wing intellectual work of Kurdish groups. It is these groups and their continuous resistance and experiences of struggle that helped us prepare for the events we had recently in Turkey. There has also been a history of left-wing activism from the early 20th century onwards on the streets of Istanbul. In fact Taksim Square, where the Gezi events unfolded, is a contested symbolic place where left and right activists have a history of confronting each other. There are, of course, international lineages and influences as well. As for the role of technology, inventive slogans and communication technologies were used by leftist activists before but the full power of digital and mobile media technologies has never been used to such an extent as in Gezi Park in the summer of 2013.

Sherene Seikaly: I think the question concerning the nature of the historical moment we are witnessing is important. I'm not sure the revolutionaries that I know would actually self-consciously define themselves as a coherent left because I think these last three years in the Arab world have really witnessed a splintering of the left in profound ways. One of the things to think about is alternative genealogies. In the Egyptian case, scholars and 'the old left', the old guard, mourned the absence of political participation and the so-called acquiescence of the Arab street. But there is a genealogy of uprising and of popular mobilization in Egypt that is very contemporary. One of the best people to read on this is Hossam el-Hamalawy who makes the important point that, if you look at the history of the labor movement in Egypt, you will see that beginning in 2006, not a single day passed without some kind of strike in the country. You can take it even further and point to 2003 and the broad global mobilization against the war on Iraq. You can take it further back and point to the mobilization in Egypt around fighting the Israeli occupation in Palestine, and in specific, the invasion of Jenin in 2000. These are multiple markers that can help us think historically about the formation of the left in relation to current events.

Lawrence Liang: In contrast to the happy stories we would normally hear about Tahrir Square and Taksim Square, I have a slightly less celebratory example. Exactly a year ago, in the city that I'm from [Bangalore], 40,000 people from the north-east part of India fled the city in a matter of three days. This was a sight that had not been seen since the Partition of India. Trains flooded with people leaving, most of them working class in the unorganized sector. And the reason that they left was because of rumors that after Ramadan Muslims would attack them in retaliation for ethnic violence that had been taking place in the north-east part of India. The one dominant image that remains from that entire period is everyone showing their mobile phones, because it was all rumors spread through SMSs and MMSs about the attacks that would happen. Now, there was not a single incident that actually took place, but as a friend of mine says, fear had found a new interface: the mobile phone.

This incident baffled a large number of people, including on the left. And I think this is a way of thinking about how we address the idea of the genealogy of a certain left mobilization and its problematic relationship to the question of technology. I say this because in the Indian context, we have two intellectual traditions: (a) the dominant

modernization route (catching up with the West) led by Nehru and (b) the Gandhian critique of technology which associates the subaltern with some kind of pure, pre-technological subject of grassroots and social change. This polarization in Indian intellectual history produces an ironic instrumentality (a contradiction): for instance, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) – one of the world's largest social movements, and a large anti-dam movement that – in an ironic way, strategically deployed all forms of media, while simultaneously discursively disavowing the media. So, to come back to the question, if technology today has produced a new technological subject, and if fear has found this new interface, what we are really looking at is the challenge of thinking about what these intimate interfaces mean in relation to the possibility of a collective politics. And if one were to read the exodus of the people from the north-east in Bangalore as a crisis, one could simultaneously read it as a challenge. If 40,000 people can move in the way that they did, then what does it mean for the left to imagine the subject of politics itself?

Jack Qiu: Back to Tarik's question, what's new? I would give a Gramscian answer: that there is nothing too new right now, but the really new thing will come. So it's the pessimism of the intellect, the optimism of the will. I come from China, a very confounding place for leftist thinkers, where the world's largest communist party rules a country that is now the most rapidly rising power base for global capitalism. We have many jokes in China about this hypocritical situation. But back to the question: Is there a new political? Is there a real radical break from the past? Mao tried to break with the past, but failed to achieve lasting change. Let's start with a basic question – what is politics? It's who gets what, when and how. The old politics to me is the elite, the rich and the powerful getting all the good stuff in whatever way they want, whereas the non-elite, the working class, the workers I work with, contending with all the bad stuff imposed upon them. That is old politics to me. If we look at China from this perspective, I can say we are nowhere close to a radical break with the past.

However, this way of approaching the political from a nation-state base is not helpful. It is a fundamental mistake. The really important thing for me is not the left or its newness but the globalism of the situation. So many of China's current new and old leftists are actually nationalists. These are the dead ends the European left already walked into a hundred years ago, and which some of us Asians are still blindly and uncritically following. We cannot seriously engage with the question of the 'new political' without engaging with the question of class in a global and comparative fashion. When Marx invented class analysis, it was global in orientation and not done within a 'national' frame. Even an 'Asian' perspective is not sufficient.

Bassam Haddad: I'd like to reiterate what my colleague just said and bring the discussion back to something maybe a bit more analytical or theoretical about the 'left' because I have a problem with the use of, not just the term 'left', but all these terms like 'secular', 'liberal', and so on. Three quick things about the concept of 'the left': first, the conditions that have produced the 'left' at a moment in history have changed. Social, institutional, technological and industrial conditions have changed. In most places, and despite the persistence of untold exploitation, they don't any more create as much of a stark and unmediated contrast between different social classes. Second, a good deal of the major demands of the left, even if uneven, have been somewhat met in some of the more

powerful countries, giving an illusion of success that has dampened mobilization. Third, a plethora of causes are being fought for now, from the defending of transgender rights, which can be led by people who don't care very much about social class but who still consider themselves to be part of 'the left', to environmental causes and so on. So there is a disarray of sorts, perhaps even of focus, priorities, and/or organization that requires a redefinition of the concept 'left'. There is a dilution that needs to be reversed, and the struggle is not only with capitalist/neoliberal systems, orders, mechanisms, proponents, and so on. It's with ourselves. In my view, one should go back to the basics so that we don't get lost in too much pontification about the 'left'.

In my view it's far more productive to think of the new hegemony – you can call it liberal hegemony, you can call it the hegemony of those who have x, y, z – the power, the wealth, and so on – but in my view, there is no 'left' that we just need to revive. What is urgent is the need to reconstitute/redefine the tools for countering hegemony. We can call this 'left' in retrospect. The nomenclature is immaterial. The bottom line is that the multiplicity of political demands makes collective action extremely difficult. And that is the beginning of the challenge. So the less ambitious we are in setting goals and the more methodical in executing them, the more successful we can be.

Sune Haugbolle: I agree with Bassam that it's no use falling back on common-sense notions. We have to interrogate them. The reason why I call it left is when I read *Kafila* and *Jadaliyya*, and when I listen to the issues put forward during events at Gezi Park, I hear issues that resonate with an agenda of equality and social justice, and also a critique of capitalism. So here is what I want to put to you: if we are in the middle of a formation of a new left moment on a global scale, what kind of moment is this?

I very much favor the continuities approach. And I think if we look at current events in a *longue durée* perspective, we can trace one historical strand to the 1950s, 60s and 70s. We can consider the establishment of the *New Left Review* and the UK version of the new left. There was also a U.S. version, just slightly different. And of course, there were similar phases and formations of the Arab and Indian left movements that responded both to postcolonial frustrations as well as with established communities parties. This was expressed for instance in moving away from the idea of a party intellectual to become cultural intellectuals. We see a similar frustration at work today. People have reacted against the failure of various institutions that could be the official communist parties, as well as a large percentage of the left that took part in various state projects, particularly in the Middle East.

How do you view the experience of earlier generations of activists? When you were beginning your projects, what were you modeling yourselves on? And if you feel a part of the left today, is there a possibility of connecting these various national and regional projects and experiences on a more global level today?

Harun Ercan: Let's start with a seemingly straightforward question: what caused the emergence of an uprising in Istanbul in this year? There is a popular explanation about what happened: that the freedom of expression in Turkey is quite limited. The mass media, mainstream media, is under control of the pro-Islamic government. And at the end of May, when the police targeted protesters, the mass media tried to cover it up. And people started to use social media including Twitter and Facebook. And then they started to pour into the streets. That's the general narrative.

I find this more than a little reductionist, especially when we consider whether there is something new in the political realm now. I can say that what is new is, in fact, in the making right now. First, I think that if those people who had been part of Gezi Park protests didn't really know the history of the Turkish state, it would be almost impossible for them to be part of an intellectual, traditional or political moment. If you just poll people on the street and ask them whether they think genocide took place in Turkey, the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the majority of people would say, 'What are you talking about?' Also if you ask people about the civil war in relation to the Kurdish national question in the 1990s – we know that more than 2 million people were forcibly evacuated from their villages during this period – most people don't know.

I think what the Gezi Park protests did to youth was to teach them what the state is in Turkey. They talked to the state, and the state used tear gas against them. They were wounded and some of them even lost their eyes. They began asking: what are we really fighting against? And they tried to find new answers. I think Turkish youth are also beginning to see that the way the state usually handled protests, the way the state legitimized its violence on opposition groups in Turkey, has started to fall apart. The Gezi Park protests set in motion a new dynamic and I do really feel there is something new.

After the uprisings were suppressed by the state, people started to organize public forums in their own neighborhoods, like Beşiktaş, and Sarıyer, in the particular district in Büyükdere, people were starting to hold workshops. I was one of those organizers. We saw that the mass media are lying to people, not telling them what's happening on the ground, and that means whatever we had learned until now must also be wrong. At the same time, it's not all about 'new'. The uprisings took some kind of inspiration from the old left in Turkey, because the old left has been quite stubborn trying to protect the memory of, for example, Taksim Square in 1977, when the Turkish socialist movement was at its peak and policemen firing on the crowd killed 36 people. The Turkish socialist movement has been trying to reclaim the site, struggling to hold May Day protests in Taksim, but the state did not allow this. My point about this particular example is that the Turkish left has also been trying to maintain its legacy even as new ways of organizing have emerged.

Murat Akser: The events of the Gezi uprising brought people together and we can identify several strands of the new left. Very briefly: the eco-activists; the neighborhood people; the radicals who are ready to fight; the social democrats; socialists and the 'ethnic left'; urban groups such as soccer fans who believe that they have a right to this place as well; the vendors who would join any cause; labor organizations; LGBT groups; the opportunists who would show up for profit; the tourists who were caught in between and participated and became part of the movement; the secularists who would be against any right-wing government. This is the new hodgepodge of the left that is emerging locally and it may translate into something globally.

Sune Haugbolle: I saw some head-shaking going on ... Sherene?

Sherene Seikaly: Lest I be misunderstood that I am celebrating or optimistic at this moment for those of you following Egypt ... things are not that good. And we have seen a popular mobilization that I would argue has taken us to the right and has given a mandate to military authoritarianism. The marriage between secularism and the right is not that exceptional at all, but I think the major legacy that I am struggling with in Cairo, and

the people that I respect around me are struggling with, is really a legacy of the hatred of the people, the hatred of the commoner, the hatred of the poor. This has a much longer trajectory that goes back to the early 20th century but arguably even further back. I don't think that the left of the 1960s and 1970s were successful in understanding 'the people' as anything more than an object of reform or a subject of mobilization. So what you saw in Egypt in 2011, beginning in January 2011, was the romanticization of the people centered on the main mantra that people want the fall of the regime. The Tunisians were of course the inspiration for this mantra. Shortly after the initial moments of euphoria, you began to see a continuing effort to demonize certain kinds of people. The figure of the thug emerged as the kind of person who did not have rights, did not have legitimate claims, could be easily put away and tortured, and if they were women, given virginity tests. Then we witnessed new mobilizations of the right. The most recent category of exclusion is the terrorist. Just in case you missed it, there is now an active war on terror in Egypt and if you turn on any, *any*, national Egyptian television station, you will see in big broad letters a banner that says 'Egypt fights terrorism'. The label of the terrorist has been a very effective way to dehumanize different kinds of opposition to military rule.

Bassam Haddad: Just to reiterate, I would like to say that the case of Syria basically represents a fantastic example of the disarray of the left, because on this issue the left has been split in an extraordinary manner, in ways that are not visible in most other cases, or at least not that extent. You have an anti-imperialist left that is looking at a particular kind of culprit and you have an anti-authoritarian left that is looking at a particular kind of culprit, and they are not seeing the commonalities. And they are both to an extent ignoring the basic socio-economic injustices that have hit the Syrian people as a function of the overlap of elite interests: Syrian elite interests and global politico-economic elite interests. And that's a great example of how problematic the question of the left is and the use of the word 'left' without qualification is.

Lawrence Liang: Of the various problems that plagued the old left, one of the underrated ones is their absolute lack of a sense of humor. No communist party that I know of has really understood the word party! So, in India for example, a very interesting campaign took place, which was organized against the attacks by right-wing Hindutva men against women going to pubs. A group called the 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women' called on people to send pink panties to the right-wing group. Because the right-wing has been associated with brown shorts typically in India, they called for women to send pink panties. Our office in Bangalore was the collecting point for it. A record number of panties! And why is this interesting? Because in some ways when we began our own work on information politics, we were critiquing global media empires. And the figure that we were counter-opposing media empires against is the familiar figure of the slouched shoulder. The poor who do not have access to medicine, the poor who do not have access to textbooks, etc. But we started encountering in private practices a large number of people who didn't really care about our critiques, they were extremely excited about the kinds of things they were able to access, and they were extremely excited about the kind of new technologies they were playing with. That forced us in a way to re-think the idea of joy as a basis of revolution. And we turned to someone like Rancière, whose argument of the idea of politics as the distribution of the sensible was a key rethinking for us. So instead of continuing to think about the figure of the poor as an

object of development in relation to new media, we began considering the poor as having his/her own digital imaginaries. The figure that emerges from this rethinking is a much more joyful and playful one.

Jack Qiu: I would like to also echo what Lawrence just said. Earlier this summer, Professor Yuezhi Zhao and her colleagues started a new institute for the political economy of communication research in Beijing. They invited me to the founding ceremony and symposium. One of the things we discussed was what kind of political economy – Marxist political economy – we should do in China. How should it be different from the official Marxism, which we call ‘*guan ma*’ in Chinese, vis-a-vis new Marxism or ‘*xin ma*’. But in our conclusion we didn’t even compare ourselves with official Marxism or different kinds of new, or ‘new new’ Marxisms. What we need is cool Marxism or ‘*ku ma*’. It’s to make Marxism cool again for the people who have mobile phones and are now tired of Angry Birds. So this would be the next level. What we talk about here is more than culture. But the cultural transformation is really about making Marxism cool. We really need this cultural reinvention of leftism in the 21st century. And that should be the very thing – from my very limited understanding – to form the soul of this new project.

But even that is not enough. If we look back, the gravest lesson from 20th-century old politics for leftism is probably the hijacking by statism. That’s the classic Soviet Union lesson, or the Communist Party of China: communism hijacked by bureaucracy without a soul. We need to therefore start from the soul again to think about what would be the appropriate way forward. Probably – using internet language – we will call it a network. The network has been formed in ways to empower the so-called ‘network state’, and of course the ‘network enterprise’. The capitalist class has been using the internet and Google to extend their empires. What we need is ‘network labor’. This new institution needs to go back to the very heart of all the great Asian civilizations and to give dignity to laborers, be they agrarian, industrial, or informational. Give them a fair share of the value that they create. That’s the kind of institution this soul should embody.

The new global left in a new media era

Aswin Punathambekar: Thank you all of you for setting the stage in terms of historical and political context in relation to which we can now foreground media and communications. I’d like to open with a question for Sherene and Bassam about the changing relationship between left politics and the sphere of cultural production. What forms of cultural production do you find yourselves turning to in explaining some of the social and political movements we’ve witnessed unfolding in different parts of the Middle East and North Africa? Are you beginning to pay closer attention to humor, satire, and parody, for instance, as key modes of political engagement? And how do sites like Mamfakinch, a collective of activist bloggers in Morocco, or your own initiative, Jadalyya, mediate between the cultural and the political?

Sherene Seikaly: Well, the Egyptians are known for being probably some of the funniest people in the Arab world. I would agree that humor, comedy, caricatures, and skits have been central to the revolutionary practices in Egypt for the last three years. And not coincidentally, we have really seen a decline in those practices since the beginning of 2013. I would mention one project in particular that we should all pay attention to: Mosireen, a

group of filmmakers who make video documentaries and screen them in neighborhoods on large screens in collaboration with Kazeboon, a public-awareness and alternative media campaign in Egypt. These groups are involved in production, distribution, and new kinds of archival practices that are all crucial to engaging politics in the spaces of the everyday and the ordinary.

Bassam Haddad: What motivated us – Jadaliyya – is disillusionment with the fact that there wasn't a place that people could point to and say, 'This is the kind of line that is missing.' A perspective for instance, and I'm going to put it crudely, that is not pro-state/authoritarian, that is not pro-exclusionary parties – whether the Islamist brand or the Christian-Evangelical brand or what have you – that is not pro-Empire, that is not pro-liberal, pro-West, and so on and so forth. So there is a room for a sort of a fourth sector. And of course it's not reduced and cannot be reduced to 'secular' or 'left'. The very idea of thinking that whatever is critical and cool must be 'left' is potentially problematic, alienating, and disempowering. In practice one has to think strategically and I think part of the problem with the organized 'left', and I dare say, part of the problem of the Marxist legacy more so than the Marxian legacy, is not being sufficiently strategic. And I think that causes many people on the left – including people and colleagues writing for us and for other publications – to fail to work together, compromise on the veneer of things in order to preserve the core, and that has, in fact, left us in greater disarray.

One of the problems of people who are starting new ventures, especially on the left, is that they want to change the world, and you cannot change THE world. Part of critical theoretical thinking, part of the work of critical theory is to understand your positionality and your limits, as well as unintended consequences of action, including shortsighted action. And once you do that and you do what you can do well, I think you serve your cause much better than speaking and pontificating in lofty terms.

However, what we can do with a new media space like Jadaliyya for instance, is actually network successfully with like-minded groups and try to find the kind of common denominator that would allow us to achieve some form of collective action. So doing what we can do best, as limited as it can be, has actually gotten us and Jadaliyya to a platform worldwide that was far beyond our imagination. What Jadaliyya has enabled is for intellectuals to connect with institutions and organizations on the ground in such a way that creates some synergy. So it's doing what you can do best in your own small circle, and maximizing that, and then building connections. The aggregate form of such action can be powerful and influential.

Aswin Punathambekar: Jadaliyya has this wonderful feature – the media round-up – that focuses on different countries. And it is clear that such small-scale yet sustained work like producing a media round-up becomes a space where connections across national contexts get made. So yes, I agree with you about the need to think carefully about scale. But could you elaborate on how Jadaliyya enables networks that are transnational in nature? And given our immediate context of a conference on Inter-Asian connections, could you say a bit more on your efforts to bring an Inter-Asian perspective to Jadaliyya that goes beyond a national or, at best, regional focus?

Bassam Haddad: Heeding my own advice, what we are doing right now is actually trying not to do that. Because to do that is to go back to this idea of, you know, wanting to do too much too quickly and then either failing or doing it in a problematic way. However,

I think we've done a decent job at creating new forms and themes that have actually not been discussed sufficiently in a serious, intellectual and scholarly manner elsewhere. For instance a satirical page that takes on everything from God to Marx. But yes, we are moving in new directions now. This fall, we have launched the Cities Page, a space that focuses on urbanism and urban developments. In other words, the city as a theme that cuts across any regional or national boundaries. And to develop content for this page, we are trying to bring in contributors from various parts of the world. So we proceed by doing the work first, then making the connections.

Aswin Punathambekar: That serves as a nice transition to my next question, which has to do with imagined audiences and publics and is directed to Lawrence in particular. Lawrence: I'd like to hear more about the issue of participation that you raised a bit earlier. How have new media – and by this I mean a media ecology that is categorized by complex relations across technologies and platforms (radio, cable, and satellite television, and various forms of digital and mobile media), and practices of copying, remixing, and circulating – how do they change the way in which you think about participation in relation to everyday life practices and in everyday ordinary people? And in what ways do you think the national then becomes a very limited, if important frame, for thinking about participatory culture and its relationship to social movements?

Lawrence Liang: I think one of the crucial things that seem to have happened is that if the ideal modern path was the idea of the opaque and the secret, there is an eruption of that. The emergence of a whole range of media forms that allow people to participate creates what we could describe as the contingent activist. Someone who didn't know she was an activist but happened to have a mobile phone at the right time. And there's a whole range of possibilities opened up by this. As people engaged with collective blogs like Kafila, we are acutely conscious of this. If you look at what has happened, initially the Kafila editorial collective had a commitment to writing a minimum of two blogs per person so that you have a certain kind of a continuous traction and intervention. We don't even write a blog every three or four months any longer because of the fact that it's been taken over. It has become a space – it offers hospitality – for a wide range of people now. And I think key to that of course is the question of who our imagined public was.

When Octavio Paz was asked, 'Who do you write for?' he said, 'I write for the only public that one should write for. The eye and the ear.' I think he got it right, but he missed out a couple of organs. I think we should write for the eye, the ear, the heart and the brain. And if you go with that and you go with the assumption that you do not have a public, you do not know who your public is, I think the results are far more interesting. And we at Kafila have very self-consciously tried to go beyond the national. So our tagline is 'run away from big media'. It should also be 'run away from the nation-state' because a lot of the key issues being discussed here, Tahrir Square, Taksim, and so on – have actually been taken up by writers on Kafila. We don't see these events as something happening really, really far away. We see them very much in our neighborhood. So I think that's the kind of change in imaginary that has happened.

Aswin Punathambekar: What you just said about publics really goes to the heart of point about Jacques Rancière's insight about 'exclusion by homage' whereby we continue to think about people on the street as objects of mobile or digital networks instead

of subjects of digital imaginaries. They might be contingent activists, but they're very much part of what is unfolding. This also resonates quite nicely with what Murat said earlier – that he just happened to be there, got attacked, and got drawn in. But my question for Murat, Harun and Jack is this: even as we talk about participatory culture, we do need to take into account the structuring effects of state and corporate control. Could you each speak to the ways in which media infrastructures have shaped your own activism and your understanding of activism in the world today?

Murat Akser: This is the most problematic part in that the state has so far retained control mainly over broadcast media and only regulates large media corporations. However, both the state and major media corporations have certainly come to understand that we have very different ways of communicating. They are now figuring out ways to block and control our access to and use of new media technologies and platforms. Turkey holds the world record for number of imprisoned journalists. Now the state is beginning to get to the general public as well; the government is now actively targeting opinion leaders. We are essentially dealing with structures that are powerfully authoritarian under the guise of being democratic. Having said that, I should point out that the slogans invented during the protests do live on. The kids on my street continue to chant them. And I find myself walking down the streets chanting them. So there is potential, but we do have other forces at work.

Jack Qiu: Let me share my pessimism, again in a Gramscian vein. Yes, Turkey has the world record of jailed journalists. China probably holds the world record for disappeared labor activists. They just disappear. Two of them are my personal friends. Last night I was on Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, writing about Wu Guijun, who led a strike in May 2013 and was 'disappeared' since then. He has been gone for 120 days. It feels like 120 years because I miss him so much. The western media, the liberal media, seldom pay attention to these labor activists who disappear. To what extent do I really think social media will work in such a context?

At the end of the day, will he be released because of my Tweets? I'm very pessimistic about that. I just do that for my own conscience. I don't care if that works or not, that's just something you do for your friendship, for your faith in the long-term betterment of that society. So, what are we doing here as intellectuals? I don't think as intellectuals we can do better than the activists, than the workers, than the journalists, than people who are already in jail. We are very lucky to sit in this Founder's Hall to talk about these issues in such a nice environment. However, what we can really do is to feel their pain. Not just be a participant observer, but to feel their pain in a very human way.

As intellectuals I see our mission as two things. First, we need to learn from workers, from journalists, from people who are in jail, from activists, in a systematic way. We then have to make that knowledge a universal part of human experience for the generations, for the civilizations of the future, not just for ourselves. So that's the number one thing. There's a second more important intellectual job: to connect the current experiences with the past, from the 1960s, to the time of the first generation of postcolonialism, to the time of Ibn Battuta. I teach my students to learn from the depth of our own Asian, inter-Asian civilizations. That's where all these floating souls of leftism, all these experimental institutions of leftism, can find their civilizational whole. And I think that's the most important thing.

Finally, about participation. Yesterday, I happened to be writing for another forum about new media and politics and I was hearing everyone else's very romantic perspectives. When my turn came, I said: 'This is a nightmare.' All this participation we are talking about is, in fact, free labor. I think the most important challenge for 21st-century leftism is to awaken people. Most of the workers I talk to or most wage earners in China are still living in the neoliberal dream. As for the elite, they are pretending to be still living in that dream. I think we are only beginning to see a really terrible nightmare of neoliberalism in the information age. We should strive to record these experiences on the ground and connect them with past experiences. I see that as really my most important job in the university, to get my students ready for that future crisis when finally we will be awake.

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