Football Fandom, Protest and Democracy

Football Fandom, Protest and Democracy offers an in-depth and inside approach to the socio-political history of football in Turkey, where fandom is often revered as part of the national identity, presenting the historical context for football events in the country.

Based on original research, the book explores the complex political processes at play in modern Turkey and deepens our understanding of fandom, fan activism and protest movements, questioning all presuppositions about the society and football fandom in Turkey. In particular, it examines the role of football fans in the pro-democracy Gezi Protests of 2013, the history of football in Turkey, the sociology of the middle classes and the transformation of football in the country.

Interdisciplinary in nature, this book is a valuable resource for scholars and students of sports sociology, popular culture studies, Turkish studies and media studies.

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Football Fandom, Protest and Democracy

Supporter Activism in Turkey

Dağhan Irak

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 A socio-historical context of football in Turkey	8
2 Football in the Ottoman Empire	20
3 Football in the new Republic of Turkey (1923–1960)	30
4 A new political paradigm (1960–1980)	45
5 Hyper-commodification of football in Turkey	59
6 Football during the AKP period (2002–)	73
7 Gezi matters	91
8 Virtually among the fans	128
Conclusion	174
<i>Index</i>	182

Figures

7.1 Political axes and positions represented by political parties in
Turkey

92

Foreword

Dr Dağhan Irak, a former sports journalist at Eurosport, connoisseur of football and doctor of sociology at the University of Strasbourg, proposes an original book to the reader, with a dual context of the undying passion for football in Turkey and the mass movements that took the country, especially Istanbul in 2013.

Football fandom is a phenomenon that the sports sociologists have been studying for half a century, initially in its radical form (hooliganism or ultras) in a context of football's transformation in Europe and also the crisis affecting the lower classes from where those fans mostly came. With the 1970s, in all of Europe, professional football came to fruition, was mediated and the clubs were bureaucratised as the cleavage between executives and the public deepened. In the 1980s, this transformation was accelerated and amplified, firstly in England, and then everywhere else in varying degrees. The increasing security measures in the stadiums, the segmentation of spectators, the emergence of multifunctional stadiums with VIP sections (the prototype being the Amsterdam Arena, opened in 1996), the explosion of transfer expenses and broadcasting revenues were indicators of this massive process. This mutation has had deep repercussions on the football spectators, especially on their more militant groups, the supporters. They were deemed to be undesirable, and were threatened by executives; therefore they took matters into their hands, with actions like protesting against the all-seater stadiums, the ticket prices, the distribution of games into different time slots, security checks and restricting laws. By these actions, they started to oppose the state or the government, directly or indirectly. Football fandom has witnessed a wave of politicisation which has caused a paradigm shift in fandom studies. Dr Irak's book contributes to understanding this shift with a certain twist; he does that in a country where almost all people considers themselves as avid football fans and even express political views through this identity.

Football fans have shown up in different political protests all around the world recently. Two cases were especially remarkable: the revolutionary movement in Egypt which ended the Hosni Mubarak rule in 2011, and the movement against Vikto Yanukovich in Ukraine in February 2014. In

Turkey, especially in Istanbul which is the centre of gravity of the country, the protesters firstly gathered to protest against an urbanisation project threatening the last remaining recreational areas of the city, and then the autocratic tendencies of the emerging Erdoğan regime. In the international press, the visibility of football supporters was mentioned frequently.

The originality of Dr Irak's research comes from his choice to stray away from the traditional fandom analysis treating the fans 'organically' attached to a club, and to analyse the 'ordinary' independent football fans who attend the games and write a lot about football and other things on the social media. Contrary to the European examples, in Turkey fandom practices are not reserved to the lower classes. As a matter of fact, a lot of supporters in Istanbul come from the middle classes and have a rather high cultural capital. Therefore Dr Irak's research contributes to a new understanding of football fandom in connection with social media and new social movements. The fans appear to be supporting the insurrections with subtle, albeit incoherent, ideological references that cannot be deciphered at first glance.

In his empirical research on the Stambulite football fans, the author brings sociological responses to these social and political phenomena. This type of 'online' fandom constructs a shared identity and also a sense of virtual community that stems from the sports field. The research establishes bonds between the politics and the fandom practised in locations other than the stadium. The book questions the social and political logic behind these fans gathering online, first to express themselves about football, and then to defend an urban and 'modern' lifestyle that revolves around a set of principles that Dr Irak conceptualises as the 'Republican Doxa'. This concept explains the values which make possible the expressions and consensus that he observes through his digital ethnographic work, which enters the working field of an anthropologist or an ethnographer, but with a corporal invisibility that limits the morpho-psychological inference effects of the daily life with carefully crafted research protocols.

In that respect, with its originality and empirical data that it creates, *Football Fandom, Protest and Democracy: Supporter Activism in Turkey* brings out new information and several untouched avenues for research in relation to football fandom and social movements.

William Gasparini

Sociologist and Professor at the University of Strasbourg
Holder of the Jean Monnet Chair in European Sports Sociology (2015–2018)
and researcher at the 'Sports and Social Sciences' research lab

Acknowledgements

This book is a product of an ongoing journey. Way past my 30s, I decided to end my journalism career to follow my long-sought academic endeavours. Who would have thought that it would become a tumultuous journey through most of which I faced all sorts of obstacles (mainly political ones), and practically live in a suitcase? This book, written in two countries and six cities, includes all the scars and shortcomings of this journey, as well as my coming-of-age as a researcher.

It was a long road, but thankfully, not a lonesome one. Through my journey, I had different people to back me up, admittedly half of whom I managed to annoy somehow. I thank them all, regardless of whether their names are listed below or not.

I would like to thank Bağış Erten and all Eurosport Turkish version crew, who provided me with an honourable exit when I needed to hang up the microphone. I also would like to thank all my viewers and readers through my career as a sports journalist. Even today, some viewers still recognise my voice or a funny remark I made on air. I am thankful for that experience, it was an honour and joy.

I would like to thank Prof. William Gasparini and Prof. Michel Koebel for their tremendous support when I was at the University of Strasbourg as a doctoral candidate. They helped me launch a career in research and teaching, even when I was doubtful that I could write and teach in French, my third language. I would like to thank Prof. Christian Bromberger, Prof. Yasemin İnceoğlu, Prof. Marie-Carmen Garcia, and Dr Samim Akgönül for turning my thesis defence to one of the best academic experiences I have ever had, to this day.

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When you are in uncharted waters, you need friends to survive. Thankfully, I just have the right ones. I would like to thank Can, Melek, Işık, Berna, Ceren, Janet, Deniz, Kerem, Seda, Beril and Gökçe for their endless support, even when I am whiny (aka all the time).

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I would like to thank President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the regime in Turkey for blacklisting me, just because I signed a petition demanding equal treatment for all the citizens of my country, along with 1,127 other colleagues. Thanks to them, I know now what I can rise above.

Introduction

On 31 May 2013, I spent the night crouching on the narrow stairs of a budget hotel facing the European Doctoral College in Strasbourg that would soon become my workplace for the next four years, trying to get my share from the poor Internet connection that would connect me to Istanbul, the city that I was born and grew up in and getting ready to leave. That was my first visit to the European capital of Strasbourg, a surprisingly introvert city despite its historical and actual nature of a crossroads. I was there to showcase my works on the political tendencies of football supporters in Turkey, a subject that I had been interested in for years, as a scholar and a sports journalist. Following a presentation at a conference organised my future research lab, I was hoping to measure up as a doctoral candidate, which would equally mean that my career as a journalist would be over. In my presentation, I drew a basic framework of football fandom in Turkey and why its politicisation would be impossible in the long term, due to the lack of democratic fans' organisations and the feeble civil society in the country in general. On the night of 30 May, at the Gezi Park, in that small recreational space right at the heart of my home town, some hundreds of protesters, including football fans from left-leaning groups, resisted the police and heavy machinery that were trying to force them to make way for an urbanisation project that would eventually turn Gezi into a shopping centre under the guise of the historical Ottoman barracks that were demolished decades before. The project certainly found a sweet spot for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist-Islamist government, as it would serve its agendas of neo-Ottomanism, gentrification and crony-capitalism. The protests were vivid but rickety, the likes of which we had seen during the urbanisation project of the Emek theatre, which eventually demolished the first cinema that I had ever been to for a soulless shopping mall. The Turkish police, as we had witnessed in the Labour Day that year, was getting more and more inclined to use violence; during the Emek protests in April, a friend of mine, a cinema writer, had her hips broken after she was dispersed by the police water cannons. But still, nobody expected that, around 5 am, the police would set the tents of the protesters afire, leaving dozens of young,

inexperienced, non-violent protesters under smoke and circled by fire. Most protesters were independent or members of environmental associations; the members of left-wing parties who were used to facing police violence were not there. Perhaps the only crowd who knew how Turkish police could react were the football supporters, who were quite few at the time. On 31 May, Turkey woke up to a feeling of shock. The country, since the military regime of the 1980s, was quite inured to police violence against left-wing militants; the silent majority of the country had even always supported it. However, such a severe response to hardly political Stambulite kids was unprecedented. The protesters were typical *'okumuş çocuklar'*, ('educated kids' in Turkish) urban, secular, middle-class youths who had been expected to make great things for the country, since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Meanwhile, the coevals of the protesters, coming from similar upbringings, felt a sudden outrage. That feeling was abrupt, but it did come out of nowhere. Especially after the 2010 Constitution referendum that eliminated all Erdoğan's rivals within the state and practically started the process that would turn Turkey into his one-man rule; the urban, secular, well-educated middle classes started to feel themselves desperate, isolated and ostracised. Erdoğan's attempts to intervene in modern lifestyles and his quest to create 'a pious youth' created an increasing uneasiness among these young people whom you can find in quintessential secular neighbourhoods of the city, such as Beşiktaş, Kadıköy and Beyoğlu. The government, passing a law restricting alcohol sale on 22 May 2013, took its toll on the city's cultural life as the prohibition of sponsorship by alcohol producers cut off the financial lifelines of many events. Moreover, the ever-present fear of Turkey becoming an Islamic state among the 'moderns' was more dominant than ever. The Stambulite secular youth lost Emek, some of its cultural life, and part of liberties directly associated with their lifestyle. The Gezi Park, which most Stambulites had enjoyed without even caring too much about it, somehow became a thread to hang on. And the violent eviction at 5 am was apparently the end of the rope.

At the stairs of the hotel in Strasbourg, I was experiencing a surreal night. I was miles away from home, and what was happening there was something I had never known before. It was like watching a movie taking place in Istanbul – well, a movie that I was trying to stream with the poor hotel connection. But, the feelings that made my generation (and the one after that) take to the streets were not unknown to me. As a journalist, I was feeling myself less and less secure everyday, and my opposition to Turkey's candidacy to host the 2020 Olympics (which was practically a propaganda stunt by Erdoğan) had returned as some complaints to my editor-in-chief from higher places. I no longer had the appetite to do my job, and I was eager to get back to the academic world that I had always kept one foot in.

The following two days, which gathered thousands of Stambulites at the streets against the government, was a surprise to me in many ways. As a

post-1980 child, I had never witnessed or expected any mass demonstration from the Turkish public; seeing hundreds of thousands of people chanting and passing the Bosphorus Bridge was simply unreal to me. Also, I was observing that football fans were becoming a pillar of the protests, the football fans that I just claimed, at the conference, were too apolitical to be organised. Actually, here, I should stop and explain what I mean when I say 'football fans'. Like most sports sociologists, my go-to resource on defining football fans is the famous taxonomy of Giulianotti (2002) that categorises this vast group into four; Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs, based on their relationship with the club, spatiality, solidarity and identity. However, in Turkey, where everyone claims to be a fan, it is hard to fit anyone into any group. More than 80% of the supporters in the country follow the Big Three clubs of Istanbul, therefore they have mostly virtual relations in various places. However, identity-wise, they are often nested, and their solidarity is as strong as you can find in a nation, which takes these people into another fandom category. Even though Giulianotti's dichotomy works very well with any other example that I know, in Turkey all the categories are mangled because these three clubs are perceived like micro-nations. These clubs, born simultaneously with the Turkish nation, mimic Turkish nationalism and, like any nationalism, it has imaginary bonds with its members from any walk of life. Therefore, even the relations are often long-distance and relations are virtual, solidarity is strong. In my sample group that I picked among Istanbul-based supporters, again a crossover between different categories occurs; they are on site, therefore they have a grounded identity, strong solidarity and they represent the 'hot' side of fandom. However, they come from the urban middle classes who have been conditioned to be customers since the 1980s, therefore their relationship with their team bounces constantly between supporter and client. This anomaly stems from a core argument of this book; the fan identity, class identity and political identity of urban, secular, middle-class Stambulite fans is interwoven and they function interchangeably. The main subject of this book, the participation of football supporters in the Gezi Protests, is a prime example of this situation. Without giving any spoilers, I will quote the essential question of this book; why do these people from Istanbul wear their football jersey when they go to political protests or a polling stations?

In Turkey, football is so intertwined with other social domains that it cannot be separated. In my 30-something years in Turkey, I had only known a handful of people that I would not identify as a football fan, admittedly most of them in academic circles. It is a country where most people start to read the paper from the sports section. Also, in Turkey, fan groups are not really too organised, they are loose entities around a common identity. You may find tens of thousands of people who would claim they belonged to Çarşı, Ultraslan or Genç Fenerbahçeliler; however, these famous groups, to my mind, do not have more than a few dozen people as a core group. Some

of these groups are formal associations but, as I will demonstrate later, being a member of an association is exceptional in Turkey, even for religious and regional associations that are more popular than others. The organised fan groups are entities that can grow in a culture of civil society which hardly exists in Turkey. Therefore, when I say 'football fan' I mostly mean ordinary people. Which is why, in the quasi-ethnographic work that will occupy a big portion of this book, I deliberately avoided working with fan groups and chose independent, urban, secular, middle-class football fans. In a political event that gathered over 5 million people in a month, restricting such a dominant identity to a few hundreds of people would effectively miss the mark and quite probably would lead to a selection bias. Gezi was a spontaneous movement that mostly gathered independent people with no political adherence or experience. In order to understand the movement, one should analyse such people.

The story of football and its fandom in Turkey cannot be told without its relationship with politics. Football in this country was born into politics and has never been separated from it ever since. Without knowing the role of football in the emergence of modern Turkey, it is impossible to understand why certain things happen in football in Turkey. For example, in a country of 80 million more than 80% of the population are estimated to support three Stambulite teams: Beşiktaş, Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe. Without knowing these clubs' roles in the Turkish national struggle, we cannot understand why they have always been treated as if they were national teams. Therefore, I ask for your patience, since the story that leads up to the Gezi Park starts at the beginning of the 20th century. We should first explain why football is interwoven with nationalism, modernity or secularism, and then we will be able to explain the reactions of football fans before, during and after the events. That is why I will start telling the story from the very beginning, when football clubs in Turkey did not even exist and football was a game played between the British merchants and their non-Muslim counterparts in the port cities of the Ottoman Empire. Football in Turkey and the structure of clubs have a unique relationship with Turkish nationalism. Not only were the clubs born into it, they also took it as a model to create their own micro-nationalisms. The Stambulite clubs are nations within a nation, and the identities they engendered are inseparable from the core principles of the Republic – the Republic that was entrusted to the urban, secular middle classes of Turkey by its founding fathers, and has been dismantled today by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The early history of football in Turkey actually sheds a light on why football has found itself in the middle of this cultural battle that reached a climax in Gezi.

Thus, football in Turkey has always been political, but it has always been proudly apolitical. Even though it may seem as a clear paradox, it completely overlaps everything Turkey was built upon. The country has been constituted upon a gigantic state that dictates everything in the whole political

field, and a dwarf civil society where feeble democracy takes place. Therefore, politics around predefined principles (that I will call the 'Republican Doxa') occupies a huge place, but the remaining, democratic political debate is confined to fringes and is often met with hostility. In other words, as long as you do not cross the acceptable lines you can be as political as you want; however, crossing the lines could easily make you an outcast in the eyes of the state and society. The Erdoğan era is a period when these lines are renegotiated and vastly redesigned. This transformation lies at the heart of the current political tension. Football environments (stadiums and any other public place that fandom takes place), which have traditionally been secular spaces, have been prime examples of the public repercussions that this transformation created. Football fans that have very rarely crossed the accepted political lines found themselves as outcasts, even enemies of the new regime. Their apoliticality became political. Before analysing how they reacted through my ethnographic work, I aim to explain the Republican Doxa and those lines that used to define acceptable and unacceptable politics. This part will require a background knowledge of the core issues that constitute the political fault lines of the society in Turkey, such as religion, secularism, the Kurdish question or the Armenian genocide. I am more than willing to explain why all these and more fall within the Republican Doxa, and how these will reappear as recurring themes during my ethnographic work.

I used digital ethnography as the principal method in this study. For three and a half years, I worked with 60 football supporters who individually and independently joined the protests. That sample obviously brings out a certain question; is it possible to conduct an ethnography of people who do not know each other and do not act interconnectedly? My answer to this question is a certain 'yes', since it is a common identity and shared values that gathered millions of otherwise disparate people in Gezi. In a setting where the lack of political organisation and experience, as well as an overt hostility against political entities, dominated, the answer to why and how millions of people acted spontaneously but harmoniously in this unprecedented social event lies in the common set of values that were engraved on the perception of Turkish urban, secular, middle classes. My work takes a sample of football supporters that were brought to the streets by the Republican Doxa. Therefore, it is impossible not to consider these individuals as a group. Digital ethnography makes it possible to work on such a disjointed but unified group. The method also opens the door to an additional depth of analysis that would be otherwise impossible. Thanks to this method, we are able to access the expressions of the sample group before the Gezi Protests to create a timeline that starts one year before the events to two and a half years after. This presents a unique opportunity to detect continuities and ruptures in political expressions and positions. To my knowledge, among the hundreds of works about Gezi, this work is the only one that analyses the participants before the events.

For this research, I used Twitter messages posted by the sample group. Since the Iran elections in 2009, Twitter has proven to be an important political tool, especially during mass protests. In Turkey, Facebook is the most popular social media platform, as in most countries; however, the semi-private structure of that platform makes it practically impossible to see all the actors in a network setting. Twitter, on the other hand, is an agora where all users are interconnected (unless their accounts are locked, which is a very rare practice); users may be relatively protected by anonymity, and the tool itself is designed to be used in mobile environments. As the quintessential social network, Twitter appeared as a platform of political communication even before the Gezi Protests. However, in a country where digital divide and unequally distributed cultural capital have had an important effect, a tardily localised tool such as Twitter was first dominated by certain groups who were more tech-savvy and connected to the outside world. Before presenting my research, I would like to explain why Twitter emerged as a platform vastly dominated by the secular opposition, to the extent that Tayyip Erdoğan called it ‘the worst menace to society’ and vowed to eradicate it. Also, the cultural battle in Turkey is actually a struggle between the cultural capital and the social capital owners in the country; in other words, the educated few and the organised masses. It is a battle between diversity and majoritarianism. Technology plays an essential role in this battle, and the Stambulite football fandom has also been nurtured by its technological capital for decades. Therefore, it is crucial to explain the complex ties between technology, modern middle classes and football fandom. Even though they seem irrelevant, hopefully the reader will realise that they are surprisingly interlacing. As a matter fact, this relationship, which is admittedly a tough case to crack, is what makes the case of football fandom in Turkey unique.

For the quasi-ethnographic part of my work, I chose two axes; thematic and periodic. In the thematic part of the analysis, I will present my findings in relation to the core elements of the Republican Doxa. In the periodic part, I divided my research into periods that start and end with important political events, such as elections or political scandals. The first axis aims to show political positions that the sample group members take, while the second attempts to understand when the sample expresses itself politically. The final objective of the work is equally twofold; firstly, I try to understand to what extent the sample group is motivated by the restoration of the Republican Doxa while making a political statement, and whether their positions changed with the Gezi. Secondly, I try to detect whether their political expressions are part of an enduring political stance, or mere reactions to political events that somehow concern them. And finally, there is one other important objective of this research. The Gezi Protests took place in 2013, not only as an unprecedented political event but also one without a successor. It has been five years since Gezi, and society in Turkey has

gradually become a society with no political reactions. Indeed, the climate of fear created by the Erdoğan regime plays an immense role in this situation. However, I believe that explaining all the silence with this sole fact would mean overlooking deeper reasons.

This book is not a football book. It is a book about the society in Turkey that takes football as a lead. As I said, almost everybody in Turkey is a football fan. It is perhaps the only remaining common interest that all the people are still invested in. Therefore, I firmly believe that trying to understand Turkey through football fandom is not a crazy idea. Obviously, this book only covers a specific layer of the society in the country; the urban, secular, middle classes that are often referred as the ‘moderns’. In a country with millions of football fans, this sport may help understanding several other parts of the society. Mine is an exploratory attempt to show different possibilities, regarding subject and methodology. In many ways, it is a mere drop in the ocean. I certainly hope it would lead to many others.

Notes

Chapter 2

- 1 Through this chapter, I will often make references to the late football historian Mehmet Ali Gökaçtı's influential book *Bizim İçin Oyna*, of which I had the chance to be the co-editor with Tanıl Bora. Unfortunately, the author is no longer with us and this valuable work has only been published in Turkish.
- 2 The name was originally chosen in English.

Chapter 3

- 1 By 1938, Prime Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu was Fenerbahçe chairman and Beşiktaş was presided over by one of the major ideologues of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP), Recep Peker. Galatasaray, which did not have a high-rank CHP member president at the time, was suffering from the breakaway of Güneş which contained many high-ranking officials of the party.

Chapter 5

- 1 Adana Demirspor (Adana), Bursaspor (Bursa) and Çukurova İdman Yurdu (Mersin) were the sole three provincial clubs in the Second Division of 1963–64 the season.
- 2 Faruk Ilgaz, interview with the author, 18 October 2007, Istanbul, Turkey.
- 3 This law has still been in effect, with a couple of changes.

Chapter 7

- 1 As might be expected, these anti-AKP iftars were met by police violence, while famous journalists like Aslı Aydıntaşbaş of *Milliyet* and Nazlı Ilıcak of *Sabah* were actively contributing to the AKP's PR efforts, just metres away. It is ironic that both journalists, along with hundreds of others, lost their jobs soon after for not being sufficiently pro-AKP. Ilıcak was later condemned to life sentence, accused of 'being part of the coup d'état attempt in 2016'.

Chapter 8

- 1 'Birlik, beraberlik içinde olmak'
- 2 The emblematic chic street of the Kadıköy district where Fenerbahçe fans often meet.

- 3 Çapulcu means 'looter' in Turkish; it was an expression first used by Tayyip Erdoğan against Gezi participants, later appropriated by them.
- 4 In Turkish, 'to be French to something' is the equivalent of 'it's Greek to me' in English. The Galatasaray supporters use this expression, also to mock with Fenerbahçe fans' claims that Galatasaray is not Turkish enough, but French, because the Galatasaray High School, the graduates of which founded the club, is the biggest French-teaching institution outside France.
- 5 Atam means 'my ancestor' in Turkish and is almost exclusively used for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.
- 6 The Fenerbahçe supporters often call their club the 'Fenerbahçe Republic'.
- 7 Even though Erdoğan gave up liberal ideas in the 2010s, he continued to use the word 'Türkiyeli', which he also used during his victory speech after the presidential elections in 2014.
- 8 Apo is the nickname for Abdullah Öcalan.
- 9 The Menemen incident is an Islamist revolt in 1930, in which a young military officer was decapitated by the rebels. This incident triggered a military operation and heavy prison sentences against the convicts.

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