Secular Populism and the Semiotics of the Crowd in Turkey

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Over the past several decades, commentators on Middle Eastern politics have been alternately surprised, scandalized, and seduced by the seemingly unexpected and contradictory relationship between secularism and popular politics. The secularizing projects of the region's various states have often proceeded through the coercive mechanisms of modernizing schemes. By contrast, social movements committed to the (re)introduction of religion into public and political life have frequently made use of the vehicles of popular politics, including mass demonstrations and the vote. In Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iran, self-described Islamic movements have asserted political demands against a secularizing or secularized elite by claiming the will of the people, often through democratic channels. To the chagrin of many observers of the Middle East, secularism seems to have constituted an impediment to popular political movements that claim the mantle of democracy.

Turkish political history provides arguably the most extreme case of this antagonistic relationship between secularism and popular politics. The national republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 emerged on the heels of the dramatic demise of the Ottoman Empire. During the ensuing fifteen years the Kemalist regime would pursue secularizing reforms not only in legal and bureaucratic domains but also in quotidian spheres of civility, dress, language, and public sociability. Yet as numerous scholars have shown, reforms that intervened into social domains could not achieve hegemonic status (e.g., Mardin 1989). With the

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introduction of multiparty politics in 1946—what many view as a democratic opening—oppositional groups successfully challenged the Kemalist regime precisely by contesting many of its secular reforms. Since the democratization of the electorate, Turkey has witnessed four military coups, which have unseated democratically elected regimes.¹ On at least two of these occasions (1960 and 1997), the military justified its intervention on the grounds that the regime in power threatened the secular foundation of the republican state. For several decades the military has taken on the role of defending secularism against democratically expressed populism.

Recent political events in Turkey present a striking contrast in relation to this history. In the spring of 2007 a series of mass demonstrations against the elected regime were organized in several of Turkey's major urban centers. The elected parliamentary regime was headed by the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which Kemalist secularists often consider in the political lineage of previously banned Islamist parties.² In 2002 the JDP had achieved a parliamentary majority in national elections. The rallies of 2007 were organized against perceived threats posed by the JDP to secular Turkey. A common refrain was "Turkey is secular, and it will remain secular" (Türkiye laiktir, laik kalacak). What is striking is not the anxiety that secularism had come under attack but the manifestation of this anxiety in the shape of crowded, popular demonstrations. The secularist military was not absent from this voicing of anxiety, but the crowds that organized against the JDP created, or sought to create, an image of Turkish secularism that ran against the sedimented historical narratives of democratic populism in Turkey. Such crowds constituted—or, again, sought to constitute—an entirely new beast: a secular populism.

There is a further historical irony here. Partly as a result of the public pressure these mass demonstrations exerted in the name of secularism, the JDP called for parliamentary elections sooner than it had intended. Several months after the secularist crowds had taken to the streets, the electorate went to the polls. Far from translating into electoral success, however, the secularist crowds had not

^{1.} The coups occurred in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. I include the so-called soft coup of 1997, in which the military did not install a temporary state of emergency but nonetheless initiated a process that unseated the democratically elected, ruling regime.

^{2.} The question of whether the JDP is an Islamist party has been contentious. Political parties and actors who identify as Kemalists view the JDP as the latest incarnation of preceding Islamist parties. As evidence of the threat posed to secularism, Kemalists often point to JDP efforts at criminalizing adultery, restricting the sale of alcohol, and challenging legal restrictions on wearing head scarves. For their part, members of the JDP have consistently repudiated the claim that their party is "religious" or Islamist.

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precipitated the demise of the JDP; on the contrary, the ruling party came away from the elections with a parliamentary majority even larger than it had previously enjoyed.

In this essay I interrogate two unexpected juxtapositions: a secular populism posited against an Islamist ruling elite, and the efficacy of crowds versus that of the vote. The secular crowds reveal as they contest a narrative of popular politics that underpins the conventional binary of secularists and Islamists. What gives political charge to the cleavage between the secular and the religious in Turkey is a narrative that maps this division onto a distinction between a statist elite and the popular Anatolian masses. The secular crowds have not simply put forward arguments about the necessity of secularism for a democratic Turkey, but in their very form, as a crowd, have challenged a field of political intelligibility predicated on the often-narrated fissure that distances secularism from a popular base of support.

This effort at refashioning secularism, as a form of popular rather than elitist politics, has not proceeded primarily through the self-conscious, critical discourses of public intellectuals or politicians.³ The arguments and reflections of the latter frequently reinscribe the demonstrations in the regnant narrative of popular politics in Turkey. Rather than privilege the deliberative dimensions of disputes about secularism, I explore how the crowd events unsettle and potentially reconfigure the discursive field that has rendered secularism an interpretable topic of political argument. The refashioning pursued by the crowds functions through social and material transformations in secularism's representative forms, including its principal actors (from state officials to demonstrators), sites of manifestation (from formal ceremonies in stadiums to crowd events in the streets), and sociolinguistic forms (from military pronouncements to protest slogans). More than a mere vehicle by means of which an already constituted secularist subject expresses its political will, the crowd events consolidate the material forms through which the secularist is being constituted as a political subject anew.

The refashioning of the secularist as a popular political subject has been contentious. The demonstrations of 2007 sparked debates focused less on the ideological or constitutional value of secularism per se than on the ontological status of the crowds themselves. Challenging the notion that the crowds were autono-

^{3.} I borrow the phrase *refashioning secularism* from the political philosopher William Connolly (1999), who employs it in an effort to rethink the historical formation and normative force of secularism. However, if Connolly's interrogation of political theory yields the conceptual outlines of a refashioned secularism, my analysis emphasizes the dialectical tension between the intellectual yield of such interrogations and the social practices that constitute the act of refashioning.

mous political actors, JDP members suggested that they were merely a facade to promote the interests of the traditional Kemalist elite. Moreover, the entry of the military into the deliberative fray cast the shadow of the state's most repressive apparatus on the demonstrations, raising questions for critics and for many supporters alike as to the sources and possible effects of the crowd's political agency. For many in Turkey, and not only for those who actively support the JDP, the populism of the secularist crowd is not necessarily a force for democracy.⁴

My analysis moves through three steps. First, I explore the narrative impetus that sustains the secularist-Islamist division in Turkish politics, suggesting that the binary is reproduced through continued invocations of the narrative. I then move to the events of 2007, in which the crowds conjured a novel figuration of popular politics. Finally, I consider the historicity of the crowd events and the politics pursued through their ongoing iterations. With the increasing failure of secularist parties to gain substantive parliamentary blocks, the growing secularist crowds enable us to reflect on the social practices involved in critiquing, as well as cultivating, spaces and subjects of democratic action.

In Search of a Constituency

Partha Chatterjee has identified the problem of the democratic legitimacy of secularizing projects in much of the non-Western world. In contrast to the countries of western Europe and North America, where the production of secular subjects and practices was achieved before universal suffrage and mass democracy, in much of Asia and Africa ideologies of secularism have been introduced more recently, amid the emergence of mass politics and demands for popular legitimacy. In a rather sweeping assessment, Chatterjee (2006: 62) offers the following political diagnosis of secularism in the non-West:

In the case of the countries of Asia and Africa, secularization is necessarily a normative project formulated and directed by an elite minority. The historical challenge before this elite is to steer the project by using the coercive legal powers of the state as well as the processes of reform of religious doctrine and practice—all within a global context where power must be legitimized by a large measure of popular consent.

^{4.} A number of leftists, for instance, have been deeply critical of what they perceive as a collusion between the secularist crowds and the state apparatus. Indeed, demonstrations hosted by labor organizations on May Day, at least since the 1970s, have been either outlawed or repressed by police action. The secularist demonstrations, by contrast, were legally sanctioned.

Whatever else secularism may signify—the separation of church and state, tolerance toward religious diversity, and so on—it carries, in many parts of the world, the historical marks of an elite-driven, coercively achieved, ideological project. The coercive elements of secularization, in such contexts, are understood either as necessary to the future flourishing of democracy or as an impediment to its emergence. In either case, secularization seems not to emerge from democratic politics and often lacks popular motivation.

In most accounts of the history of democracy in Turkey, secularization is perceived much as Chatterjee outlines it. From 1923 until 1946 Turkey was governed by a single party, the party of Atatürk, and during this period the Kemalist regime instituted many of the legal, bureaucratic, and ideological reforms associated with secularism.⁵ Secularization was not, then, the product of political demands expressed by democratically elected representatives of social constituencies. The prominent historian of modern Turkey, Çağlar Keyder (1987: 124), argues that the opening of multiparty elections in 1946 and the success of the opposition party in 1950 constituted a "fundamental break in Turkish history": "For the first time, a popular electorate expressed its political choice." The opposition to the Kemalist regime, represented by the Democrat Party, generated support, in part, on the basis of a platform dedicated to religious freedom, as well as on the promarket, antistatist economic platform of a maturing bourgeoisie. According to Keyder, the Democrat Party was openly populist, pushing forward the class interests of the bourgeoisie through rhetoric that engaged the religious sensibilities of "the masses."

In the years leading up to the 1950 election and in response to the newly formed Democrat Party's populist calls for religious freedom, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (RPP) made various concessions: it reopened previously banned religious schools, instituted courses in religious education that had been prohibited, and withdrew the ban on visits to sacred tombs. Additionally, the RPP attempted to legislate land reform, redistributing state land to the landless and poor peasantry. Attempting to understand the RPP's reformist efforts, Keyder (1987: 126) writes: "The explanation probably lies in the bureaucracy's attempt not at social revolution, but at forging a new alliance with the poorer peasantry against the growing challenge of the bourgeoisie. Rather belatedly, and no doubt

^{5.} The two exceptions were the Progressive Republican Party, founded in 1924 and closed down after nineteen months, and the Free Republican Party, formed in 1930 and closed down after four months.

prompted by the decision to hold real elections, the bureaucracy awkwardly began to search for a constituency." With democratic elections on the horizon, Kemalists needed a constituency. The issue is not just that the RPP—the party of Kemalists in the early republic—lacked electoral votes but that the secularizing project of Kemalism—as "a normative project," in Chatterjee's words—lacked a base of popular support.

Recent ethnographic research suggests that Kemalist secularism continues to lack a popular base. Jenny White describes the efforts of a secularist association to organize courses in typing, literacy, bookkeeping, and the like for women in a largely working-class neighborhood of Istanbul. Local residents, from diverse social and religious orientations, attended the courses. The association's Kemalist organizers attempted but largely failed to mobilize this plural audience into an electoral constituency for secularist political parties. Although many of these organizers were themselves neighborhood residents, sharing the socioeconomic status of the women they sought to mobilize, they identified with forms of dress and styles of consumption that marked them as affiliated with what their neighbors perceived as an elitist program. In contrast to activists connected to Islamic political groups, the secularist organizers failed to "popularize their message" (White 2002: 258). White's account suggests that the Kemalist search for a constituency, a project instigated in conjunction with the opening of multiparty elections, has continued without successful resolution over the past half century. For White, the failure of the RPP to garner enough votes to gain representation in Parliament in the 1999 national election was another sign of this continued failure.

Between Keyder and White, it is possible to construct a composite account of secularism and democracy in Turkey, in which the normative project of Kemalist secularization has come under critical assault through the democratization of the electorate, often through the elicitation of religious sentiments (see also Toprak 1981; Yavuz 2003). Yet such accounts often downplay the social, and not merely analytic, labor involved in distinguishing practices and sentiments deemed secular from those designated as religious. As Talal Asad (2003) emphasizes, the cleavage of the religious from the secular is itself politically delimited and subject to dispute and contestation. In Turkey historical narratives of popular politics are frequently invoked and debated with the aim of determining the sociopolitical significance of the opposition of secularism and religion. Contemporary political commentators contribute to this process when they interpret the consistently poor showing of Kemalist parties in national elections as evidence of the ongoing

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failure of secularists to "popularize their message" and to appeal to a broader social-economic base (see, e.g., Öktem 2007; Taspinar 2007). Not restricted to intellectual discourse, the narrative is referenced by state agencies, such as the military and the Constitutional Court. Apparatuses of the state invoke the narrative as a way of defining themselves as defenders of secularism against the perceived threat of popularly elected "Islamist" parties—even though the designated parties rarely refer to themselves as such and often disavow the term altogether.

The Welfare Party (WP), for instance, came to power in 1995 with 21 percent of the vote—not enough to take an outright majority in Parliament but enough to lead the resultant coalition.⁶ Within a year several of the WP's aims—including, among other things, plans to build a mosque in a central public square of Istanbul and to improve relations with other Muslim states, like Libya and Iran—were perceived by the secularist military as signs of an anti-Kemalist agenda. The extent to which such political projects posed a threat to secularism was highly debated. By 1997 the Constitutional Court decisively resolved the matter, voting to close down the WP on the grounds that it had violated the principles of secularism. In the absence of electorally viable secularist parties, state agencies have come to represent and defend secularism against popularly elected, but purportedly Islamist, regimes.

The secular demonstrations of 2007, along with similarly organized crowd events over the past fifteen years, provide a markedly different image of secularist politics. The crowds were not formulating an ideological understanding of secularism different from that of political parties or the state's coercive arms; rather, they sought to create a new form of secular political subjectivity. The mode, not simply the message, of secularism was being constituted in a novel fashion. The figure of politics cast by the crowds does not fit in the regnant narrative that pits a statist, secular elite against a popular Muslim mass. However, the crowd events were often interpretively reinscribed in this narrative—not only by the ruling regime that the crowds were protesting but by secularist parties as well. At stake in these demonstrations was the narrative intelligibility of democratic politics in Turkey.

^{6.} The leadership of the WP maintained close associations with a network of Muslim political activists, known as the National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi). Opposition groups often cited these connections as cause to label the WP Islamist. On the intellectual and ideological history of the National Outlook Movement and its connections to the WP, see Yavuz 2003, esp. chap. 9.

The Limits of Political Communication

In speaking of the narrative intelligibility of politics, I seek to delimit the field of deliberation in which the actors of the debate and the objects under dispute are rendered recognizable and interpretable. Jacques Rancière's critique of political theories developed under the sign of consensus is useful in this regard. "Consensus," Rancière (1999: 102) argues, "is a regime of the perceptible: the regime in which the parties are presupposed as already given, their community established and the count of their speech identical to their linguistic performance." Political theories organized around ideas of consensus presuppose, as already constituted and established, the identity of political participants, the conditions of their discourse, and the objects of debate. For Rancière, a more robust conception of politics takes account of sites in which the very comprehension of an utterance is questioned or made newly decipherable—when, in other words, the conditions of narrative intelligibility of the political field are transformed.

The secular demonstrations of the spring of 2007 operated at the boundaries of narrative intelligibility, claiming to defend an ideology usually associated with the state and its apparatuses but taking the form of a popular protest. Often enough, the grounds of intelligibility of the crowds, not their purported ideology, came in for heated debate. The demonstrations provoked arguments over whether and in what manner the crowds could engage in political action: as a genuinely popular political force, as a mask for a specific group's interests, or as an ephemeral and ultimately impotent figure. The crowd events allow us to consider how the limits of political communication are designated, disciplined, and contested.

The demonstrations were prompted by a series of events instigated by the stepping down of Ahmet Necdet Sezer from the presidency. Before assuming the presidency, the archsecularist Sezer had headed the Constitutional Court that had banned the WP in 1998. His secularist credentials were further solidified during his time as president, as he consistently vetoed efforts by the then ruling JDP-led government to introduce what he deemed "religiously guided" legislation, regarding the criminalization of adultery and the wearing of head scarves in public institutions. The vacancy left open by Sezer's departure was to be filled upon appointment by Parliament. The JDP held a majority in Parliament, thus giving the ruling party the power to seat someone from within its own ranks, perhaps even Tayyip Erdoğan, the JDP's leader and the country's prime minister.

In response to rumors that the JDP intended to place one of the party's own in such a powerful position, the head of the Turkish Armed Forces, General Yaşar

Büyükanıt, released a statement expressing his hope that Sezer's successor would promote the interests of the republic in actions and not only in words—a perceived jab at the JDP leadership. In a speech the following day, Sezer argued that "efforts reflecting religious politics, which target Turkey's secular order and the Republic's modern achievements, increase social tensions" (*Hürriyet* 2007b).⁷ The signals of a state intervention loomed large, and secularism again needed the defense of agencies outside democratic politics proper.

On April 14, the day after Sezer's speech, the first rally to protest the possible appointment of a JDP president was held in Tandoğan Square in Ankara. The location, not arbitrarily chosen, was in front of the monumental mausoleum of Atatürk. Organizers advertised the protest as a "republic rally" (Cumhuriyet mitingi), using the slogan "Lay claim to your republic" (Cumhuriyetine sahip çık). Initiated by the Association for Atatürkist Thought (Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği), the rally was attended by more than three hundred civil society groups, leaders of various left-leaning opposition political parties, professors of major universities, and many unaffiliated others who claimed to support the secular republic. The slogans they chanted reflected their secularist orientation: "Turkey is secular, and it will remain secular"; "We don't want an imam as president"; and "The path to the presidential palace is closed to Sharia." The event's location in a public square, the participation of civil society groups and politically unaffiliated citizens, and the use of slogans all reinforced the notion that this rally was not only secularist in character but populist as well.

Similar "republic rallies" were organized in Istanbul on April 29, in Manisa and in Çanakkale on May 5, in Izmir on May 13, in Samsun on May 20, and in Denizli on May 26. In little more than a month, seven rallies were organized across the country. Each was constituted by large crowds occupying public squares and streets and chanting the same slogans.

Attempts to constitute "the people" are always representational efforts, and, as such, the people do not precede their representation. Parliamentary elections are one manner of conjuring a notion of the people. The crowds of 2007 provided another representational mechanism for constituting a populist claim. Semiotic features at the heart of the claim that the demonstrations were popular and not state-ordered included the size of the crowds and their sites of emergence. The reported number of participants at these individual events ranged from tens of thousands, to hundreds of thousands, to more than a million. The leader of

^{7.} All translations from the Turkish are mine unless otherwise noted.

the secularist RPP, Deniz Baykal, attended several of these events and offered a statement emphasizing the popular nature of the claims put forward by the demonstrators:

Turkey is currently experiencing a debate about the duty to claim responsibility for the secular democratic republic. The starting point was the scenes in Tandoğan and in Çağlayan Square [the public squares in Ankara and Istanbul, respectively, where the rallies were held]. At this point the republic is passing into the hands of the people. . . . A very powerful popular movement is forming. . . . We have never before witnessed this large of an effort at laying claim to the secular republic. (*Hürriyet* 2007a)

In accord with Baykal's statement, national newspapers published photographs of the crowds, whose outlines always exceeded the frames offered by cameras positioned high above the ground. After the rally in the coastal town of Izmir, the front page of *Radikal* showed a striking image of a seemingly indivisible crowd of red—Turkey's national color, which most participants wore to the event—juxtaposed with the deep blue of the Aegean coastline. The headline that day ran, "The sea is blue, the land is red" (*Radikal* 2007b). The images generated the idea that secularists constituted not a political cadre of ruling elite, as has long been claimed, but "the people." The crowd was being fashioned as a popular, political actor.

Representing secularists as a popular constituency, the crowd was a potent political sign. Not everyone, however, was willing to interpret the secularist crowds as a sign of populism. The leadership of the JDP responded immediately to these crowd events, largely by attacking the popular character attributed to the crowds. Shortly after the rally in Ankara, Prime Minister Erdoğan suggested that opposition political parties had organized the participants and dispatched them to the demonstration (bindirilmiş kıtalar), implying that many were not there out of sincere belief in the cause and that the demonstrations lacked a genuinely popular base (NTV-MSNBC 2007). Erdoğan's critique targeted the representational effect of the crowd. His challenge, in other words, was not to the political platform of opposing groups but to the semiotic functioning of the crowd.

Crowds at later demonstrations responded to Erdoğan's attack on their populist aspirations by including a new chant in their repertoire: "The dispatched squadron is here" (Bindirilmiş kıtalar burada). With this rallying cry, the crowd contributed to a growing chain of discursive reflexivity: Erdoğan's comments on the semiotics of the crowd had become the object of crowd response. This discursive give-and-take between the crowds and the prime minister focused not on the juridical and

ethical values of secularism in the Turkish republic but on the functioning of the crowd itself. The crowd was both an actor in a debate with the ruling government and the sign whose interpretation was being disputed. The crowd had begun to talk about itself, seeking to mediate the terms of the debate. What was contested was whether the crowd's mode of political communication functioned as the voice of a popular demand or as the pawn of a concealed and limited interest.

While these rallies were largely organized by civil society organizations, the military was not absent from the unfolding of events. The military's emergence into the debate cast further suspicion on the communicative autonomy of the crowds. On April 24, after the Ankara rally but before the Istanbul event, the JDP decided not to put Erdoğan forward as its candidate for president, selecting instead the party's minister of foreign affairs, Abdullah Gül. On April 27 Gül's candidacy came up for vote in Parliament, and to little surprise he won a large majority. However, secularist opposition parties refused to participate in the vote, and the JDP fell just short of the votes needed to achieve quorum. With the vote's validity in question, the Constitutional Court was called on to determine the status of the Gül appointment. Before the court produced its verdict, the military intervened through what has been called an "e-coup." At 11:10 p.m. that day the military posted a message on its Web site, identifying recent "threats" to secularism:

It has been observed that the efforts of certain groups, who are engaged in endless activities directed at eroding the foundational values of the Turkish state, at the head of which is secularism, are on the rise. . . .

In recent days, problems emerging in the process of the presidential election have focused on the debate over secularism. This situation has been followed by the Turkish Armed Forces with concern. It must not be forgotten that in these debates the Turkish Armed Forces take a side and are absolute defenders of secularism. (*Radikal* 2007a)

The military "takes a side." As before, secularism was being narrated as under threat and in need of defense against Islamic groups—again, despite persistent claims by members of the JDP that they were not seeking to challenge the constitutional principle of secularism. The military ultimately did not intervene by force. However, several days after its memorandum, the Constitutional Court ruled that the vote appointing Gül to office was invalid because of the lack of quorum.

The military was not directly involved in organizing the secularist crowds, but its occasional statements and threat of coercive force contributed to the public cultural context into which the seemingly autonomous, popular demonstrations emerged. Participants in these crowd events expressed a wide range of opinions

with regard to the military, some explicitly insisting that a coup was not necessary, while others claimed to be supporters of antigovernment intervention. The crowd's voice was not wholly autonomous from the military apparatus, and yet many participants nevertheless insisted that the crowd and the military did not constitute a single front in the fight with the ruling government over the future of the country.

Autonomous from state organization and yet bound intimately to its most repressive arm, the secularist crowds of 2007 raise a number of pressing questions: Was the crowd in fact a political actor in its own right, capable of voicing a secular populism, or was it the vehicle of a statist elite's will, seeking to precipitate a military intervention that would bring a temporary end to political deliberation as such? Moreover, if such crowds do offer political voice to popular demands, how do they differ from traditional mechanisms of political representation performed by elected parliamentarians?

These questions become more pressing when we recall that the JDP's initial failure to seat its candidate as president led the party to call for early parliamentary elections. Whether or not the secularist crowds reflected something other than the tactic of an opposition party and other than a sign of the military's repressive force—that is, whether they truly revealed a popular constituency—would be put to the test of a national election. Elections were planned for July 22, several months after the e-coup and the crowd events of April and May. When the results arrived, the JDP emerged with a larger share of parliamentary seats than it had previously maintained. Its share of the national vote increased from 34 percent, which it garnered in the 2002 election, to 47 percent. With 84 percent of the electorate having participated in the vote, the JDP claimed to have a mandate to appoint the president of its choosing and to push forward legislative reforms that it had long sought to enact, especially with regard to the wearing of head scarves in public offices and universities. The vote revealed broad support for the JDP. The party had not only survived the mass demonstrations of the spring but could now genuinely claim to represent "the people."

What, then, were those crowd events—a mode of expressing the anxieties felt by a growing, if electorally disorganized, constituency of citizens, or just the ruse of "an arrogant elite that has lost its hold upon society" (Öktem 2007)?

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On July 23, 2007, the day after the JDP so convincingly won the national elections, a deputy chairman of the RPP, Onur Öymen, voiced his despair:

If you are in need and hungry, if you are not at all content with your life, if you criticize the government every day from dusk till dawn and you then vote for the very same government, there must be something which cannot be explained with logic. What is it? It is the government's policy to harness the religious feelings of the people for political aims. If the people, despite all these hardships, still vote for this party, that probably means that they vote for them because of religion. . . . If illogical reasons play such an important role in politics, this should make us think. (quoted in Öktem 2007)

These remarks reflect a now-familiar narrative in which the success of the JDP at the polls is attributed to the religious populism of the party's rhetoric. The remarks reveal the continued failure of secularist political parties to control the electorate. Indeed, Öymen's distress is not misplaced: from the elections of 1995, when the WP garnered 21 percent of the national vote, to the 2007 election, in which the JDP won 47 percent, political parties widely perceived as connected to a trajectory of Islamic politics have steadily increased their parliamentary power.

Öymen's comments reflected not only the challenge of combating a populist rhetoric that draws on "the religious feelings of the people" but also the dramatic reversal of fortunes for a secularist political party that only two months earlier had witnessed large crowds demonstrating in the name of secularism. Öymen exclaimed that in towns where "tens of thousands of people spilled into the streets, in extraordinary protests of the government, the ruling party won the election with a significant majority. You cannot explain this logically" (*Radikal* 2007c). The power of the crowd to express a populist political demand failed to translate into the electoral success of the main secularist opposition party. For Öymen, a representative of the losing party, the failure of the crowds to transform into a robust electoral constituency belied reason and revealed the crowd to be a phantasmatic and ultimately transient and powerless figure. This account of the crowd's ultimate political failure is, of course, developed from the perspective of party politics. I want to suggest, by contrast, a productivity on the part of the crowd, but one whose effects cannot be measured by electoral results. It is worth

^{8.} Lisa Wedeen (2007: 63) critiques normative definitions of democracy that focus solely on electoral results and preclude attention to "the phenomenology of participatory politics." Regarding the difference between the political efficacy of crowds, on the one hand, and of parliamentary representation, on the other, see Chakrabarty 2007.

looking more closely at the ambiguous figure of the secularist, which claims the coercive power of the state against the government and yet seeks to represent the democratic will of the people, at once elitist and yet staging crowd events.

Contemporary secularists self-consciously deploy signs that distinguish their social affiliations and political loyalties: pins, labels, posters, styles of dress, and statues. Such signs are often invoked in staged performances, including visits to Atatürk's mausoleum or exhibitions of photographs of the early republic. In this regard, secularists constitute themselves not simply as a political elite but also as something of an anthropological object, defined by semiotic forms. The semiotic ordering of the secularist community is not new—the Kemalist elite of the early republic, for example, self-consciously flaunted European patterns of consumption. However, since the mid-1980s and in particular the 1990s, the notion that secularists constitute a social constituency has acquired a new ideological valorization, as neoliberal discourses of civil society have progressively intensified. Secularists may constitute a social community, organized through semiotic practices, but the notion that secularists *should* constitute a social constituency has become a discursive object in its own right.

The social discourses of secularists are analytically distinguishable from the metadiscourses that position secularists as a social, and not merely state-ideological, form. The metadiscursive question of whether secularists represent a statist elite or a social movement emergent in civil society is central to the problematic of populist politics, and it is the crowd, above all, that represents the secularist as a figure of populism. By virtue of the populist sign of the crowd, and in contrast to a long history of elite-imposed secular politics, secularists come to be constituted in the form of a social movement.

The crowd has often appeared in European intellectual history as a curious contradiction: powerful and possibly violent, but whose emotional buildup is transient, dispersing on the physical dissolution of the crowd itself. For Öymen, the deictic nature of the crowds of 2007—that they existed not simply as representatives of a political platform, equally expressible in the rhetoric of the crowd or in a party pamphlet, but only in proximate, here-now relationships to their contexts of

^{9.} My discussion draws on recent ethnographic work by Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) and Esra Özyürek (2006).

^{10.} Often the figure of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European thought, the crowd featured prominently in writers as diverse as Gustave Le Bon, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Elias Canetti. For critical accounts of this intellectual trajectory, see Laclau 2005 and Mazzarella 2007.

emergence—accounts for both their strength at generating political enthusiasm and their frailty in conforming to the procedures of the ballot. However, Öymen's disappointment aside, the crowds he witnessed were not wholly spontaneous and evanescent. The cry "Turkey is secular, and it will remain secular," which featured prominently in the rallies of 2007, has appeared in demonstrations for at least fifteen years. It functions as an intertext, tying the 2007 rallies to a history of secularist crowds. Such rhetoric is one vehicle by which the crowd embeds and constitutes itself within a developing history. In addition to the repetition of rallying cries, the physical sites of and the style of participation in these events establish from one crowd to the next a historical continuity that exceeds the duration of any particular event. For all its seeming transience and electoral impotence, the secularist crowd has sustained a relatively perduring form, whose momentum has progressively developed across the past decade and a half.

Recent scholarship suggests that the secularist crowd in Turkey first emerged in the 1990s, as part of an effort to generate popular excitement for state holidays. Describing a transformation in the celebration of a national holiday, Republic Day in 1994, Yael Navaro-Yashin details elemental features of the secularist crowd. The event was organized explicitly in response to previous efforts by WP governors throughout the country to downplay this tradition—a celebration of the Turkish state that has long been carried out as "a disciplined school ceremony, an annual ritual of the military, a boring old program on state TV, an obligatory ceremony organized by municipalities and attended by state employees" (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 146). Certain Kemalist officials, such as the mayor of Istanbul, responded to the Islamist neglect of this holiday, not by redoubling efforts at staging the traditional statist affair, but by moving the ceremony to Taksim Square, one of the most prominent public squares in Turkey. Esra Özyürek (2006: 139), who attended Republic Day celebrations in Istanbul four years later, notes the same shift in location, emphasizing the concomitant transformation in the nature of the event: "In order to transform the celebration from an official one into a festival, they first moved it out of the confined spaces of the stadiums into city centers. Streets and squares used for the celebration created an aura of freedom and accessibility to anyone on the street. In the streets, crowds could participate and walk without following a line or synchronized steps." The street facilitates the formation of a crowd. The phenomenology of the crowd, as evinced in its potential unruliness and its lack of formal discipline, creates a certain desired

^{11.} On the intertextual mediations of crowd events in a different context, see Manning 2007.

effect: a move away from voicing secularism solely as the ideology of the state and toward a notion of secularism that might serve as an object of popular identification. Indeed, the crowds may have employed certain symbols of Kemalist secularism—including styles of dress, pins, flags, and rhetoric about secularism chanted in slogans—but the crowd itself functioned as a metadiscursive sign of populism.

The articulation of the Kemalist as a sociopolitical subject with the crowd as a material and textured form requires social investments. From one perspective, the symbolic community of Kemalists—a community constituted through a shared repertoire of signs—appears to use crowd events to express itself in a populist mode of political expression. Arguing this point, Navaro-Yashin (2002: 146) explains that Kemalist secularists in the 1990s were particularly aware of the problem of popular legitimacy that they faced: "Coming forward as representatives of the state, and preaching the principles of Atatürk, would no longer do, when the arena was left to the Welfare Party to define 'society,' 'the public,' or 'the people' in its own terms." "Atatürkist officials," she continues, "had to produce an effect or an image of being representative of society" (146). The transformation of a formal ritual of state into a crowd event produces a dramatic shift in the materiality of secularism's representative form. The crowd, whose movements are not formally coordinated as they were in the older tradition of state ritual, appears spontaneous and enthusiastic. As a sign, the crowd can be deployed to achieve a political end: the crowd creates a tangible representation of "the people." 12

This argument importantly demonstrates the social mediation of any claim to representing the people. However, what is presumed is that the subject using the sign exists before the use of the sign itself. It is undoubtedly true that certain social organizations, mayors, political party chairs, military officials, and some subset of citizens identify with the name of "Kemalist" or "Atatürkist." Yet the very diversity of subject positions, which Navaro-Yashin rightly insists cuts across

^{12.} Timothy Mitchell discusses the significance of the crowd in the construction of a new notion of "society" in colonial Egypt. The capacity for the material, proximate crowd to represent the abstract notion of society was itself an effect of a particular regime of power. Describing the influence of French sociology, including in particular the work of Le Bon and Émile Durkheim, on the Egyptian elite, Mitchell (1991: 126) writes: "The behaviour of the crowd, Durkheim explained, was an indication that society was a thing; something with an 'objective' existence. The object consisted of shared beliefs. In phenomena such as the crowd, he wrote, these collective beliefs 'acquire a body, a tangible form.' . . . The independent reality or objectness of the social, in other words, was a reality constituted by the ability of this ideal object always to present itself in a non-ideal, material body."

the traditionally defined domains of state and civil society, suggests a multiplicity of intentions and of political means. Not all participants in these demonstrations supported the same political party.¹³ Moreover, while some participants expressed explicit support for military action against an Islamist party, others sought to distance themselves from this tradition of coercive intervention. The label *Kemalist* does not of itself construct a historically stable and singular social referent.

It is the assumption that Kemalists constitute first and foremost an already formed social community, from which the populist sign of a crowd can secondarily be expressed, that might confuse an observer about the crowd's failure to translate street presence into the electoral success of a political party. While various self-described Kemalists may have explicitly sought to constitute crowds in their efforts at creating a populist image, the diverse constitution of the crowd suggests that its social effect is not reducible to the aggregate of intentions of individual participants. The crowd is not simply the effect of a new political strategy on the part of a long-standing community of Kemalists; the Kemalist is reciprocally constituted as an effect of the crowd.

The crowd as a sign of secular populism has been in the making for more than a decade. During this period the capacities of the secular crowd have developed. Unlike the events that Navaro-Yashin and Özyürek witnessed, the demonstrations of 2007 were not efforts at creating a popularized form of a state holiday. The crowds emerged in relationship to specific political developments taking place that spring. Their capacity to gather together large numbers of participants, responsive to such developments, should be taken not simply as a spontaneous expression of individual citizens or of civil society groups but as an effect of the fifteen-year history of the crowd. The historical process of creating a crowd susceptible to the prompts of ongoing political events has not resulted in the electoral success of Kemalist political parties, which have failed to find themselves either in the parliamentary majority or in any position of parliamentary representation during the past decade. Participation in crowd events, however, has only expanded across this time.

As the crowds have grown in size and in political responsiveness, the Kemalist secularist has emerged as a deeply ambivalent figure: at once conjoined to the military *and* constituting a social movement, simultaneously representing a historical class of urban elites *and* claiming to represent "the people." In the face of Turkish secularism's elitist and modernizing legacies, the developing form of the

crowd has yielded new sites, actors, and activities for a secularist politics, whose referents lie in public spaces, civil society groups, and protest campaigns. As the participation of party leaders at these events reveals, Kemalist parties have sought to mobilize the energy of such crowds, but a popularized Kemalism has come to be construable, in the first instance, through the iterations of the crowd.

Disputing Secular Populism

The secularist demonstrations of 2007 were, ostensibly, about a contest between secularism and Islamism, as governing political ideologies. For disillusioned Kemalist politicians like Öymen, the crowd is an immature political expression in this fundamental ideological cleavage. The crowd generates enthusiasm but carries no force other than what it motivates on election day. These demonstrations, however, were not organized merely as support for secularist political parties or for the ideology of secularism they claim to defend. It is more productive to examine the problems posed by the crowds to the dominant narratives of populism that organize the deliberative field of political argument in Turkey.

Far from a fleeting and impotent figure, the secularist crowd has grown and developed across a historical period that extends back at least to the 1990s. No longer restricted to popularizing traditional state holidays, such crowds have grown responsive to political itineraries that do not follow a ritual calendar. In the process, the secularist crowd has gradually emerged as a new actor, making populist claims in public debates about political appointments and legislative reform.

A number of Turkish intellectuals, however, have been directly critical of the crowds' populist pretensions. Baskin Oran, for instance, has called secularist participants "white Turks" (*Economist* 2007), a phrase that refers to an urban secular elite, in contrast to the masses migrating from rural Anatolia to city centers. By invoking the phrase in this context, Oran critically addresses the semiotic functioning of the crowd, as a sign that constructs the secularist as a politically underrepresented social constituency in its own right, and challenges the populist claim of the crowds by reasserting the conventional equation of secularist politics with an elite class. ¹⁴ He locates the crowds in the constellation of categories made

^{14.} White (2007) also describes secularists as "white Turks." She usefully troubles the characterization of "Islamist" parties as representing "black Turks" by arguing that the JDP reflects the historical emergence of a new elite, which rivals the traditional secularist elite. Potuoğlu-Cook (2006) similarly notes the emergence of the new Muslim elite, highlighting its practices of social distinction. Neither author, however, considers the reverse proposition, namely, that the characterization of secularists as white Turks may itself be a point of political contestation.

available by the reigning narratives of political discourse. Between the crowds and their various interpreters, what is being debated is not the value of secularism as an organizing ideology of state but the viability of the secularist as a popular political subject.

Disputes over secular populism, not secularism per se, have continued in the aftermath of the most recent parliamentary elections. In February 2008, several months after its reelection, the JDP pushed through legislation permitting certain styles of head scarves to be worn in public offices and universities. In response, secularist crowds were again mobilized. Indeed, the success of the JDP in the last election has not stifled the iteration of the secularist crowd.

The first protest of the head scarf reform was held in Ankara. The historically established, populist semiotics of the crowd were deployed with full force. As with the secularist demonstrations of 2007, the rally was held in the square facing Atatürk's mausoleum. Advertisements for the protest announced, "We will be at Atatürk's mausoleum [Anutkabir] for the sake of the secular republic." More than one hundred thousand people reportedly participated. Among the slogans the crowds chanted was the familiar intertext "Turkey is secular, and it will remain secular."

Another demonstration occurred a week later. Addressing the crowd, one speaker responded to the legal change, which by then had been approved by Parliament: "This will not end here. It will continue through legal and democratic processes. We must protect our principles. This debate is about whether or not our Republic exists" (*Radikal* 2008). The secularist crowds and the elected Parliament were again butting heads, as two distinct claimants to the popular will. The speaker at this demonstration argued that a legal and democratic process would reveal that the head scarf reform violated the principle of secularism. A democratic process, she insisted, would vindicate the secularist position against wearing head scarves in public institutions.

The legal process that later emerged took, to many observers' eyes, a decidedly undemocratic turn. In the weeks that followed Parliament's approval of the head scarf reform, the state's Constitutional Court agreed to hear a case that sought to ban the JDP and several members of its leadership on the grounds that the party violated the secular principles of the state. Responding to this turn of events, the European Union's enlargement commissioner, Olli Rehn, maintained that "in a normal European democracy, political issues are debated in parliament and decided in the ballot box, not in the courtroom" (quoted in *Economist* 2008). A secularist position was again constituted outside the normative spaces of democratic politics through a stance that does not require popular consent for its enact-

ment. The court ultimately decided against the ban but levied various financial fines and penalties on the JDP.

Between the Constitutional Court and the military, on the one hand, and the crowd, on the other, the secularist voice equivocally represents the state's most coercive apparatuses and clamors for popular dissent. What is at stake is not simply whether democratic procedures will vindicate secularism but whether and in what manner the secularist can constitute a new figure of democracy in contemporary Turkey.

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