Civil disobedience can be understood as a civic practice of contestation – a noninstitutionalized practice with which citizens (in the broad sense, not necessarily those recognized as such by the state) challenge established and institutionalized forms of vertical authority. What can we learn about this practice from how it is exercised in the real world? How can the activist practice of confronting “low-intensity representative democratic institutions” with “participatory or high-intensity democratic forms of democracy and self-determination”\(^1\) inform the attempt to theorize disobedience? Asking these questions, that is, starting from the practice of dissent “on the streets,” is especially relevant in the case of civil disobedience, since the discussion about this political practice – a practice with a rich and contested history that stretches from Henry David Thoreau via Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. to Occupy – has been marked by a number of systematic shortcomings. These shortcomings can be seen as stemming from theorists’ systematic ignorance of the complex reality of disobedience, leading them to a simplified and depoliticized understanding of this practice.\(^2\) In order to counter this tendency, in what follows I will sketch some theoretical lessons that can be drawn from “the streets,” and in particular from the recent uprising in Turkey that started on May 28, 2013, and that has become a prominent episode in the cycle of global protest that started with the so-called Arab Spring. After the protests in Istanbul had first focused on the neoliberal transformation of urban space and its disastrous ecological and social consequences, they spread out socially (in terms of participants), geographically (in terms of cities involved), and politically (in terms of both the substance of the demands that were formulated and the way in which they were formulated) – their political and theoretical significance, however, is even further reaching.\(^3\)

Highlighting some central aspects of these protests will serve to indicate three ways in which the practice of civil disobedience is more complex and also more political than it is suggested by the mainstream understanding of it as a primarily or exclusively symbolic and nonviolent act of protest that involves breaking particular laws without challenging the legitimacy of the existing order. The three aspects I will focus on are: first, the meaning of “civil” in civil disobedience; second, the political mobilization and the essentially collective character of civil disobedience; and third,
the inventiveness of the practice of civil disobedience in terms of the repertoire of political action that goes beyond the simple dichotomy of a merely symbolic appeal on the one hand and violent militancy on the other.

So to start with the first point: What is civil about civil disobedience? It is well worth emphasizing the civil and civic character of the protests in Turkey which is all the more remarkable since it is the outcome of massive self-restraint in the face of the enormous aggression and repression exercised by the government and its security forces and the evident power asymmetry they imposed on the movement from the very beginning. Against this background, the civility of the movement should be understood as an expression of political commitment rather than of loyalty to the state or the existing order; in addition, as Gandhi and King already knew, civility in this sense is a significant political achievement and the always precarious outcome of an individual and collective work on the self.⁴

In mainstream discourse, the “civil” in “civil disobedience” is often taken to mean that protesters do not engage in confrontational, aggressive, or violent behavior, that is, it is often identified with (romanticized and one-sided interpretations of) the idea of nonviolence and peacefulness. Whether that is convincing, however, of course depends on how precisely violence is understood, and the problem here is that it is an extremely contested and politicized notion.⁵ My point here is not that we should develop a better theoretical definition of violence that can then be applied to practice, but rather that without problematizing how both violence and nonviolence are understood in both theory and practice and without

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⁵ A related problem is that this identification is often based on an extremely one-sided understanding of the activism of King and the broader context of the American Civil Rights Movement, and more recently also of Nelson Mandela and the ANC, that in some cases amounts to historical whitewashing.
paying more attention to how this distinction is politically instrumentalized, insisting on the necessarily nonviolent character of civil and civic forms of contestation is both politically and theoretically problematic. In this light we have to remind ourselves that in many countries, including Germany and Turkey, it can nowadays count (in public opinion but also in a court of law) as an act of violent coercion to collectively stand in one place, to sit down on the street, or to make fun of the ruling authorities; that often trespassing or damaging private property are subsumed under the notion of violence thus assimilating them to serious violations of the bodily integrity of real persons; and that it is a feature of repressive tolerance, in Herbert Marcuse’s sense, that governments pursue a tactic of divide and conquer with regard to protest, portraying and celebrating certain forms of protest as good (good in terms of who protests how and with what aim) and labeling and repressing other forms of protest – often those of marginalized groups – as violent, uncivil, and criminal.

Instead of simply identifying the civil and civic character of collective action with “nonviolence” we should therefore insist that civility is quite compatible with a variety of actions often classified as violent by the media and the state, most prominently violence against oneself (which plays a crucial role in the repertoire of action of protest movements, think of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi which was a catalyst for the mobilization of the people in Tunisia in December 20107), violence in self-defense (think of relatively minor forms of violence in defense against police aggression), or, maybe even more obviously, the destruction of private or public property which is also often considered as violent.

6 See: Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in: Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, A Critique of Pure Tolerance, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, pp. 95 – 137. A recent illustration of this tendency is the public reaction to the riots in the French banlieues and in London – that even riots that are framed as “issueless” or driven by “consumerist desires” can be seen as a reaction to the violation of civic claims is a point made by Ferdinand Sutterlüty, “The Hidden Morale of the 2005 French and 2011 English Riots,” in: Thesis Eleven, vol. 121, no. 1, April 2014, pp. 38 – 56.

What is decisive for the civility of protest is not that it is nonviolent in a sense that would exclude these forms of action or that it is purely symbolic and remains “peaceful” and “civilized,” but rather that it does not follow a military logic and replace civil and civic resistance with armed force aimed at the physical destruction of an (imagined) enemy. Hence, in the case of the Gezi uprising, the civil character of the movement – despite its engagement in sometimes confrontational and even violent forms of action – prominently expresses itself in the radical refusal of seeing the other side as the “enemy” and of playing the established political game of polarization and defamation. As in so many other recent protest movements such as Occupy, in the Turkish uprising civility has therefore also been connected to what is often called prefiguration. Prefigurative politics experimentally anticipates the transformation it seeks to initiate in the way the struggle is organized here and now: in a horizontal, participatory, inclusive, and civil way, thus breaking not only with the authoritarian state and the politics of the right but also with the vanguardist tradition of the left.

The first lesson to be learned is thus that civil and civic forms of resistance are not reducible to purely symbolic means of protest – even occupying a square or an intersection is obviously more than symbolic. In order to retain their effectiveness, civic forms of protest in general and civil disobedience in particular will, in many circumstances, have to be careful not to be reduced to their symbolic dimension, they have to keep a confrontational character as well – not least in order to defend their civil character. Civil disobedience can only function as symbolic protest – as dramatization in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sense – if it involves moments of real confrontation, such as practices of blockade and occupation but also digital forms of activism such as hacking, and at the same time it can only function as real confrontation if its participants are aware of its irreducible symbolic dimension – the fact that it is always also a performance in need of (and in search of) a stage and an audience.

The second lesson theory can learn from practice concerns the question of political mobilization. I do not mean this in the sense of looking for a single set of “objective” causes that can explain why people start to rise up. After the event, social scientists are quick to point to shifting patterns of social mobility, urban transformation, and clashing political cultures as the causes of what happened, but as with the so-called Arab Spring these are largely ex-post rationalizations, since no one was able to predict these events. Importantly, this includes the activists themselves who have been equally surprised by the dynamics of the chain of events they have set in motion. This sense of surprise has to be preserved against the urge to explain and to fit what happened into all-too-familiar historical patterns and narratives. Of course, people have myriads of reasons to protest, but for such politically and socially heterogeneous groups to come together and to be so resilient in the face of repression and criminalization something else has to happen. What is this something else, this unexplainable and unpredictable remainder that seems to drive collective action?

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10. See: King 1963: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”
In order to grasp this dimension of the practice of disobedience one has to move beyond the individualist focus of liberal theory and the spotlight the media puts on individual heroes of the rebellion, such as, in the case of Turkey, the famous “woman in red” or “Talç'idman” – as important as their role might have been as metaphorical figures that became representatives of the uprising. Instead, we have to take the essentially collective character of civil disobedience into account. The dynamics of collective action is, of course, difficult to theorize but it is an essential aspect of most first-hand accounts and shapes the experience of protesters. When theorists try to capture this dynamic (rather than explain it away or ignore it), they often resort to relatively metaphorical language. Think of the empowering collective experience of overcoming fear and what Hannah Arendt called the joy of acting together and of beginning something new;11 of Jean-Paul Sartre’s marvelous analysis of the storming of the Bastille at what would later become the beginning of the French Revolution in terms of the “groupe en fusion”12; or of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s multitude in which plurality and creativity come together in the emergence of new political subjectivities – and what is it that these movements exemplify if not the ability of the multitude, usually denied by the state and its representatives, to organize and govern itself?13

Without taking this first-person perspective, this phenomenology of protest into account, we – or future social scientists – will never be able to understand why and how people do what they do in an uprising. In contrast to what the liberal mainstream suggests, this is rarely a matter of isolated individuals standing up for their rights or their conscience against the state or the majority: more often, and paradigmatically, civil disobedience is the collective assertion of political agency, which confronts the vertical form of state authority and its institutional realizations with the horizontal and informal power of the association of citizens or the governed, thus creating new political subjectivities both at the individual and collective level that might well turn out to be the most transformative effect of such an uprising.14

The third aspect of disobedience about which theory can learn from practice concerns the repertoire of political action. Tahrir, Zuccotti, Syntagma, Taksim … : Obviously these are very different contexts, in which very different aims, agents, and strategies are involved, but as many commentators have pointed out there still seems to be something like a shared emerging political form: All these protests have prominently involved occupations of public space, that is, democratic acts of reclaiming and reappropriating this space – on a

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more than purely symbolic or metaphorical level – as something that already belongs to the people who use it on an everyday basis but that is threatened by both privatization and state control.\(^{15}\) Again, these occupations are prefigurative in that protesters organize these spaces by way of political and social relations that the protest is supposed to defend and aim at the same time.

On a general level, there seem to be at least three shared characteristics of how these movements occupy these spaces and of the prefigurative practices realized within them: First, these movements are all committed to plurality in terms of ideological commitments, identities, aims, strategies, and forms of organization and collectivity – in the case of Turkey this is again especially noteworthy against the background of a decidedly antipluralist political culture characterized by widespread patriarchal, nationalist, and paranoid tendencies. Second, its prefigurative politics emphasizes the autonomy of the movement and the way in which it creates its own spaces, independently from the state and the private sector, effectively ignoring their existence (this is the “exodus” component of this form of protest), organizing and protecting in their own way the plurality of bodies that make up the protest movement.\(^{16}\) This can take a variety of forms that exemplify what it could mean to understand democracy not merely as a set of formal institutions and procedures, but as a form of life, from using the Internet – especially social networks sites such as Twitter and Facebook – to create one’s own alternative public sphere\(^{17}\) via establishing networks of care and support (e.g., in terms of medical assistance and food supply) to building barricades to defend the occupied space against the police. In this respect it is crucial that the prefigurative character mandates a self-reflexive and

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\(^{17}\) On the ambivalence of Internet-enabled activism between empowerment and the state’s capacity to control and suppress see: Zeynep Tufekci, “Is the Internet good or bad? Yes. It’s time to rethink our nightmares about surveillance,” available online at: https://medium.com/matter/76d9913c6011, accessed 05/15/2014.
self-critical form of political practice that continually interrogates its own presuppositions, structures, and implications – and this is indeed what, despite all obstacles and challenges in terms of organization, the forum- and assembly-centered non-hierarchical politics of these movements has aimed at approximating.

The third aspect – the creativity of the uprising – has been prominent in media coverage but often represented in a one-sided and trivializing way by isolating specific instances of humorous intervention from the broader context of the movement and its more confrontational tactics. In that context creativity is a form of constantly expanding the repertoire of contestatory collective action.

In the case of Turkey endless examples illustrate that this has happened with an astonishing frequency, from the initial occupation via the barricades and the humor expressed in posters and street graffiti to the “Standing Man” and the proliferation of public park forums. This creativity is important for addressing a variety of problems protest movements are facing, from responding to, and evading, state practices of control and criminalization, via the problem of cooptation and integration into the realm of normalized culture (a.k.a. the commodification of protest – indeed, it did not take long until the first Occupy Gezi T-shirts and coffee mugs were sold on the Web), to the problem of what in social movement studies is called the exhaustion of the repertoire of collective action: the fact that when confronted with protest, people tend to react by saying that they have seen it all before. It is in this political context – and not in collections of funny banners and graffiti in exhibitions or catalogs – that the creativity of global activism has its place.

The lessons one can learn from paying attention to “the streets” are thus manifold. Their general teaching is that in order to generate contestatory power, political movements in general and practices of civil disobedience in particular have to combine new forms of civility that will challenge established assumptions about civil and
civic norms, the symbolic and the confrontational, alternative forms of collectivity, and a prefigurative transformation of public space in ways that trigger the dynamics of collective action. Civil disobedience thus emerges as an essentially collective and political practice of contestation, in which structural deficits of the existing system are addressed in ways that go beyond the very limited and often dysfunctional channels of existing institutions. Activist forms of political protest, such as practices of disobedience, should therefore be seen as an essential part of the history and the present of democracy understood in a broader and more radical sense – a democracy-in-the-making and “from below” that is not reducible to its always deficient institutional realization in the state but crucially relies on extra-institutional practices of contestation of which civil disobedience is a prominent example. In this respect, what has been said in response to the question whether the French Revolution of 1789 should be seen as a success might well be true of the most recent cycle of global protest: it is too early to tell…