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Air Maidans, Can It Be?

Zeynep Ceren Henriques Correia [1,2]

1   Department of Urban and Environmental Sciences, University of Ankara, Ankara 06590, Turkey
2   Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Kırıkkale, Kırıkkale 71450, Turkey;
    zcakyuz@kku.edu.tr

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Abstract: Airports are located at the core of the production process, but can they also be where the "revolutionary subject" is hidden? We know what airports stand for nowadays, but have we pushed for what they could possibly stand for? Can airports, as a form of urban technology, be reimagined beyond their current roles of a "space technology nexus" driving capital movement? Can we imagine, idealize, and locate them somewhere else in a period dominated by the economy of time, where speed and accessibility matter the most? In this framework, this provocative essay aims to frame airports as a protest and public expression venue. Drawing inspiration from recent examples, such as the Stansted Airport protests in the UK, the Occupy Airports protests that occurred all around the United States, and touching upon the divergent example of Turkey's 15th of July night protests in 2016, I provide a glimpse of an alternative prospect for this key urban infrastructure.

Keywords: airports; maidan; occupy movements; protest

"*Air flights, air systems and air-mindedness are thus central to the emergent global order. They generate mass movement, new iconic architectural forms, new forms of dwelling, interconnectedness, new inequalities, novel global meeting places, distinct ambivalent juxtapositions, new modes of vision and enhanced relations of 'empire' as attractors, new securities and systems of surveillance and new forms of protest.*"John Urry [1] p. 35

1. Introduction

This essay aims to contribute to an expanding concern with Urry's farsighted note (highlighted above) about the emergence of airports as a venue for protest. Airports are a form of urban technology that hold potential to generate movement and stimulate mobility within the geographies of their articulation. Even though they are increasingly propelled to global agendas due to terrorist attacks, deportable subjects, precarious populations, and airports as security theatres, can they also function as a "venue" for protest against contemporary "demons"? Advancing this idea requires us to question how and in what ways the conceptualization offered in this essay differs from other airport related protests that have been widely addressed in the literature. In summary, the aim of this essay is to highlight the emerging capacity of airports as a venue for public protests, which I materialize in the term "air maidan".

However, before developing this concept any further, I find it important to provide a contextual and linguistic justification alluding to its proposed designation. The use of the term "air maidan" stems from the fact that Turkish language has always sheltered this potential role of airports to act as public venues, at least in terms of diction. Although airports are nowadays considered as a category of "port" (in Turkish havaalanı), both the official website of the General Directorate of State Airports Authority [2] and the vernacular of our elders still refer to airports as "air maidan" (in Turkish havameydanı). The term 'maidan' is associated with open public squares much alike the ancient Roman Forum where processions, commemorations, and public congregations occurred. Using this terminology in reference to airports puts them on par with other emblematic "maidans" still presently used for similar purposes such as Istanbul's Taksim, Ankara's Kızılay, Cairo's Tahrir, and New York's

Times Square, among others. Furthermore, some of the defining protests of the early 21st century have occurred in "maidans"—the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul and the Arab Spring protests that took place all over Middle East are clear examples. These events, but more importantly for the scope of this essay, the "maidans" where they occurred resonated across the globe to become global icons of public mobilizations, as exemplified by the later "Euromaidan" demonstrations in Ukraine. Therefore, I also argue it is pertinent to borrow this term for airports given their role as emerging "stages" for protest.

2. Recent Examples of Airport Protests

There are numerous examples of airport-related protests, ranging from airport construction and air flight impacts to local and regional environments, local and indigenous people, noise pollution and public health concerns. Many such protest movements have been victorious, including the iconic example of the planned airport for Notre Dame des Landes in France [3,4]. This protest became known by the acronym ZAD (zone à défendre) and is particularly relevant because it emerged as and remained a protracted occupy movement to block the proposed airport project based mainly on ecological and agricultural concerns. Early this year, French authorities announced they would ultimately abandon the airport project. However, there are also many silenced, oppressed, and ignored airport-related protests that descended into conflict and clashes. For instance, İstanbul's Northern Forest Defence protest platform has been searching for collective strategies to raise awareness towards the ecological and social (namely associated with labour rights) impacts of İstanbul's third airport [5]. Thus far, they have not managed to prevent or even alter the planned airport and its mass transformation of İstanbul but remain active and have achieved some success by taking legal action against other projects in İstanbul and around Turkey, mainly based on ecological concerns.

In contrast with the above examples, the concept of "air maidan" presented here stands for something else. It aims to frame airports as a protest venue, drawing from the examples of the Stansted protests in the UK, the occupy airports protests that occurred around the United States as well as Turkey's 15th of July night protests in 2016. In March 2017, anti-deportation protestors chained themselves to an aircraft at Stansted airport in London to prevent the departure of a flight scheduled to take asylum seekers and migrants back to Nigeria and Ghana [6]. As result, the people due to be deported were returned to immigration centres, and according to reports, many flights had to be diverted to other airports. Only a few months before the outbreak of the Stansted "air maidan" protest, similar occupy protests occurred in US airports as a reaction to President Donald Trump's executive order imposing a travel ban on visitors from seven Middle Eastern nations [7]. These events were remarkable given that they targeted both large and small airports across the USA, allowing protestors to raise their voices and spread their word across the world through social media with the #occupyairports hashtag.

Before these two events took place, interestingly, Turkey had already experienced a similar mass protest at airports during the summer of 2016. This protest emerged from a remarkable chain of events and it could be seen as a mirror image of the previous examples given its point of origin—it was called for by the head of the Turkish state, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, rather than in opposition to the measures of state authorities. In July 2016, the haunting "demon" of the military coup descended upon Turkey once again. Strikingly, it was a live appearance of the Turkish President on a popular news channel through Facetime that ignited social media throughout the country and mobilized people to fight against the attempted coup. On that night, President Erdoğan concluded his Facetime interview by addressing the nation and calling on the public to assemble at public squares and at airports. This address was unique on two accounts. First, summoning public gatherings in city squares is among the country's blacklisted actions, especially in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests. Second, airports are mentioned for the first time in the context of a public square in Turkey, as a place of public congregation to "strike a blow" against the coup. Although the Turkish example stands out from the previous cases with regards to its motives, initiator, and other relevant aspects, it might still be considered as converting an airport into an "air maidan".

These emerging protests are qualitatively different from earlier public manifestations at airports in at least two key aspects: strength and scope. Their strength stems from this infrastructure's increasingly central role as a mobility provider in modern capitalist societies. Circulation (of goods, people, capital, etc.) is an organic part of the production system [8] and mobility must be maintained for the system to function. Airports provide unprecedented speed and reach compared to other mobility modes and, in the light of ongoing de-industrialization [9], de-agriculturalization [10], and aviation de-regulation [11] trends, any blockage to the flows they generate results in a potent disruption of the intrinsic workings of interconnected contemporary societies. Consequently, the scope of such protests is also deepening and widening. Airports are no longer just an "exceptional" transportation infrastructure for a select few, they are increasingly the "glocal" representatives and mediators of "modern" life. This shift in the capacity of airports ends up being inevitably reflected in the scope of protests; as airports become "public spaces" or "maidans", both the topics of protest and the identities of protesters evolve to address transversal challenges of contemporary societies.

3. Looking forward—Airports as Public Protest Venues

These examples and their evolving nature push us to rethink the role of airports in modern societies. For example, in his book, New State Spaces, Brenner [9] categorizes the spread of airports as a "normalization of exceptional spaces". Should airports be considered solely as "Large Technical Systems" [12] composed of solid, naive, bare cement, stone, and metal? Are they simply a form of (urban) technology as Marcuse evokes: "domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology, and the latter provides the great legitimation of the expanding political power, which absorbs all spheres of culture?" [13]. Or more than that, can they also serve as a venue for protest? If so, how? Sudjic [14] states that "Airports, along with shopping malls and museums, are one of the definitive public spaces of the contemporary city". What does this "definitive" capacity stand for? Many of the critical essays about airports rely on Foucault's work on governmentality in relation to disciplinary power, bio-politics, and the technologies of subjectification [15–17]. Others argue that modern states use airports as part of their "capacity to authorize legitimate means of the movement" [18], in parallel to Weber's characterization of states according to their capacity for "monopolization of the legitimate use of violence". According to this argument, airports become the emblematic sites of this enforcement through the constant scrutinization of kinetic goods and people. For this reason, airports stand out as blueprints for the increasing and intensifying surveillance of public spaces [19]. This view emphasizes how mobility is "enabled, given licence, encouraged and facilitated" for some whereas it is "forbidden, regulated, policed and prevented" for others [20]. In his commentary of occupy airports protests in USA, Christopher Schaberg asserts that "at airports, ideals of free movement collide with protocols of restriction and privilege. That makes them vital sites of protest". On the other hand, the very design of airports is made up to potentiate "loungification" by facilitating temporary stays, frequent transitions and regulated movement of some groups at the expense of others. Because airports are designed to sustain the daily flow of a vast number of passengers, protesters are able to use the nature of airport design to assist their social mobilization. Overall, the dark side of mobility regimes in airports make them potent gravitational centres for protest [21]. To put it differently, such features make airports a potent "maidan". While the different approaches by the state and management authorities to people from different colour, different nationality and even different passenger classification are prevalent, this potential for protest prevails too.

The mainstream view is that the introduction of an airport brings promise of economies of accessibility, agglomeration, and prestige to the locality. It can also bring along the "earthly heaven" of tax-free shopping. It is no wonder then that localities crave the attraction of activities directly and indirectly linked to aviation as well as their catalytic effects [22,23]. However, in possibility, the airports of contemporary cities could also be a locus of social mobilization. Antonio Negri defines the present-day metropolis as a locus of socio-political mobilization, where the expectations that social mobilization would arise from the factories of the industrial epoch have also moved into the city along

with all other dwellers [24]. Since the first man-manned flight, flying became a symbol of accessibility and freedom as well as military and state mightiness. In extraordinary moments, or for certain groups of passengers even in ordinary days, the second face of airports became visible when freedom and possibilities fade. In such events, the symbols of cosmopolitanism and tolerance might be taken over by unreceptiveness and discrimination [21].

As a venue for protest, airports have high visibility due to their key role in transporting goods and people. As demonstrated by the example of the attempted "shit-in" protest at Chicago O'Hare International Airport during the 1960s, even actions that affect small private spaces at airports may reverberate across multiple scales and networks due to the connected nature of infrastructure spaces [25]. From a different scope, Brenner crystallizes this rationale by relying on the Lefebvrian concept of planetary urbanisation: "important socioenvironmental transformations in zones that are not generally linked to urban conditions . . . have in fact been ever more tightly intertwined with the developmental rhythms of urban agglomerations" [26]. That means any interruption in the flow of goods or people, or "the rhythm of the urban", might have an effect on an unexpected span of area and unimagined scale. For instance, the flights disrupted by the volcanic ash cloud generated by the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajokull in 2010 caused big economic impacts on the air travel industry and on their link system. It is asserted that this effect was larger than the US air traffic halt after the terrorist attacks on 11 September [27]. This is the result of an incremental dependency on air cargo and air travel by the global community [1]. In what concerns the message of this paper, the greater the vulnerability of international economy due to reliance on air mobility, the greater the visibility of the protestors. That vulnerability makes the airport a possible "maidan" as long as their place at the centre of infrastructure networks remains unaffected by future mobility transitions.

On the other hand, occupying an airport could be presumed reactionary to the infrastructure state which prioritises "governmobility", the will to utterly control mobilities over and beyond its territory [28]. As mobility is a form of capital, it is also a stratifying force and a tool to overcome time and space limitations [29]. Furthermore, acknowledging the due criticism regarding the vast ecological and monetary costs of airports all around the world also feeds the reactionary gatherings in ports that have the potential to turn them into ordinary "maidans". The ongoing planetary transformation is "so dynamic as well as so destabilising, because its energising and totalising force 'expulses' (expels) people, 'secretes' what Lefebvre calls a 'residue'" [30]. That residue is spread all around the planet, not only the peripheries, but also among residents of global cities whom are working in precarious jobs, dwelling in decaying neighbourhoods which are kept out and lagging behind. Interestingly, these same "residues" or the people that that are "left-out", also often take the stage in the very symbols and actualizers of such transformation, airports, against the impacts of ongoing planetary transformation.

The hub status of airports could nevertheless bring multiple beneficial inputs to social mobilization. The sounds rising from the "air maidan" would mingle with passengers passing through and together, logistics workers, air workers, travelling white-collars, students, tourists, hajjis, researchers, migrants, all in touch with the denizens of the city, turn a port into a true maidan. I would also argue that shifting airports towards sincere "maidans" should also consider widened and comprehensive access for refugees, thus reframing airports as a key venue to facilitate contact with solidarity groups, legal counselling professionals, health care volunteers and other relevant organizations. However, only time will tell whether this qualitative change will be possible or whether authorities will deploy new security and surveillance measures aimed at reclaiming protest space and circumventing disruptions. These are topics that certainly require further scholarly development. Still, it is clear there is a change in how technologies were "historically imagined, idealized and located" [31] and the "air maidan" is one of the recent expressions of this change. As the rise of isolationism, anti-migrant policies, xenophobia, and precarity persist, airports will take on this new attribute, "air maidan". A flight of hope!

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