Susan Buck-Morss interview/Açık Radyo

Ö.M. - So welcome back…back after about more than 8 years. We had a very lively discussion, I remember.

S.B-M. – I too.

Ö.M. – Now I want to ask you almost the same exact question. A very short one and a very short answer would suffice I suppose : Where is the world heading ? But before that, just let me tell you and tell the listeners that only today when we are recording this interview with you, we started our daily programme of Open Newspaper this morning and at least for half an hour we covered… actually we lovingly covered all the protests around the world. They were actually scattered all over the globe, from the UK, starting with this Million Masks March organised by Anonymous, and then it was also on the front steps of the White House, and also in Brazil protest groups called for fresh demonstrations, and then there were again some priests and nuns in Kentucky protesting against the blue gas line, very strong in fact. In Canada there were thousands, at least two thousand people protesting against these pension reforms, older people, senior citizens and very many women among them. Then in Europe, in Greece we had this general strike again. Then the Greenpeace activists on the Moscow river protesting for the release of their friends, the activists who were taken prisoner. And in Armenia and everywhere else, in Bangladesh too it was the second day of a strike and there was a huge clash with the police where at least 25 people were…

İ.M. - …. And hunger strikes all over Turkey

Ö.M. – Yeah but not only in Turkey though, there were quite a lot of hunger strikes elsewhere as well. In the province of Rize there were people protesting against the small hydro-electric plants there. And also in Çanakkale, Bayramiç against feldspatt mining.

İ.M. – and on the Syrian border as well…

Ö.M. - …yes on the Syrian border there was this woman mayor from Nusaybin who had been continuing her hunger strike for eight days.

S.B.M. – for what ?

Ö.M. – Against the building of the wall there. And then people died in Morrocco because of hunger strikes, and all around Turkey there were young students protesting against the YÖK, I'm sure you've heards about this, its's the Higher Education Board. And last but not least in Finland where the Prime Minister is having a visit, there was a young protester who hackled them, so to say, saying « One minute ! ». She was taken out immediately of course but at the end she

was heard shouting « Her yer Taksim, her yer direniş » (everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance). So, where is the world heading ? (laughter)

S.B.M. – Well isn't it striking first of all that it's happening all over and you know about it. The information is spreading in so many ways. People are aware all over the world that there are simultaneous demonstrations. I think that this is what's new from when we last met and this is very, very important. Maybe it's not on CNN, or in the New York Times or any of the stations that you have in Turkey but if you go to several news sources, or if you go to independent news sources you'll find these things out. And they do matter. We in our research group are talking about this as a trans-local phenomenon. We like that word better than global. Global has a too totalitarian or a totalistic implication I would say. This idea of trans-local, I think, is very strong. Isn't it interesting also that the groups of people you mentioned, they're very different kinds of people, there may be religious, young people, old people. You know it's not just one... you know like in the old Communist Party... there is no one organisation that controls the whole thing and this diversity is something that all of us are experiencing as something new.

Gezi Park. Everyone is talking to me about the tremendous diversity of people who came in solidarity... to be together and to support each other. And even if they were footbal fans, or even if they were intellectuals, or even if they were Islamic believers or non-believers, it didn't matter. What mattered was that people showed their support for each other without it being an official celebration. This was something that happpened spontaneously and it happened for the reasons that you were mentioning. I mean what holds these different instances together -from the pipeline in the United States to the struggle againsat ecological damage in Turkey- what holds these things together are global problems. These are global problems. Ecology, ecological devastation is not something that can be solved for one nation, or one class. It's all of our concerns, it's transnational but something we can't work with ... we tried working with our governments with Kyoto and other instances and there is no agreement. And the United States is one of the worst problems there, and China is also a problem and there are other places where this is a problem. So there's no place where this seems to be working through mediation of national governments. So we have to do something else and people are doing something else.

Ö.M. – Just let me interrupt you for a moment if you please. One of the most dramatic and exhilirating moments of the Gezi revolt as far as I can make it out, was when some women from Gerze, Sinop, where there is a struggle against the building of a huge coal plant -I don't know how many megawatts, I can't remember the exact figure now- they had been struggling against this for at least the last three years ... and especially the women who were up front. And they had been gassed by both the police and the gendarmerie and so on but they are still holding strong. But when I saw these women who had come to Gezi Park to show their solidarity, I said « this is it, now we're getting somewhere ».

S.B.M. – That is so interesting. This is an experience that's happening to so many people, so many people that have been active but felt in isolation. And suddenly there is a sense that there's a force, it's a force… I talk about it as a global crowd, it's a force, a crowd is not just an assembly, it's not just a demonstration, it's a force, it's a political force. And numbers matter. And the trans-local extent matters. And the information that people are sharing makes so much difference… so that you don't have to become a hegemonic power as a resistance. You don't have to be all the member of the same political party or whatever, you can still have a political force.

This makes me so very, very hopeful. I guess the difference between where the world is going now … I mean the way I would answer the question now and how I would have answered it years ago is : I'm more hopeful.

Well. Certain avenues have been disappointing. I don't know precisely where we were during George Bush's war but now we have Obama's war. And even though the movement that produced the victory for Obama was something new and something which had to do with this force that we are talking about. But his actual years in office have not seen much change in policy at all. Very small changes, not enough and people are disillusioned with this way of staying within the definition of democratic institutions and working for a party where one group of officials will be elected to replace another. It simply is not working, and people are still voting but that can't be all that democratic politics is about. But this situation, this constellation of things now is very different, isn't it, from seven or eight years ago you said, whenever it was when we were speaking together ?

Ö.M. – Yes, more than eight years ago when you weren't so pessimistic either when you gave the answer to the same question but …

S.B.M. - …I'm an optimistic person…

Ö.M. – Yeah, but now you're more hopeful and I would agree with that, very much so, especially after we have been through the Gezi thing, everything is very different from our perspective, from Turkey's perspective as well maybe.

İ.M. – But it's still a state of emergency, right ?

S.B.M.- Oh, this is my use of the word emergency. It has two connotations in English. One is the one that Karl Schmidt refers to when there's a government that suspends the law, suspends the constitution, in order to protect … itself in fact, as the representative of the people. So this is called a state of emergency and in English it is the translation of « ausnahmezustand » ? in German, and I tried to find correlative words in Turkish but I had a very difficult time. So this one state of emergeny is a crisis situation where you have to suspend the law. But there's another meaning of emergence, emergency in English which is something new emerging. Actually the word was emergency in the sixteenth century. Now when we speak of something new emerging, a new emergency, in

the sense of anticipating something new... so emergence is really nice and I think the closest I came to it in your language is the word butterfly I think, what was it ?

Ö.M. – Kelebek

S.B.M. – Yes, kelebek. Like a butterfly emerges from a cocoon. It's more like this kind of emergence. I think that everyone is aware that this is happening. This is a kind of universal sensibility. It's striking whether you talk to Mexicans or Egyptians or Brazilians or Canadians or whatever, there is ... and I say, in the plural, « Brazilians », obviously I'm talking about those who were demonstrating, those you were talking about and who are making actions everyday.

İ.M. – It's a trans-local state of emergency.

S.B.M. – Yes, a trans-local state of emergency.

Ö.M. – If we come back for just a moment to this state of optimism that we all share, I believe, Russell Brand, the British comedian wrote a fantastic article in the last issue of New Statesman.

S.B.M. – I'm surprised that you know about it. Why ? Because I got word of it from a friend in Athens and that that night I heard about it from Paul Guillmore's wife, this British intellectual, and now I'm hearing it from you.

Ö.M. – Yes, you know, yesterday when we were making this recording on the 7th of November, well we were talking about this huge Anonymous group's One Million Masks March, and he took part in it, he participated in it and then he took off the mask and said « I am the face of Anonymous ». I think I like the idea.

S.B.M. – I do too.

Ö.M. – And then there was this article, I think it's a fantastic article. In one place he says : « We now must live in reality, inner and outer. Consciousness itself must change. My optimism comes from the knowledge that this total social shift is actually the shared responsibility of six billion individuals who ultimatley have the same interests and the self-preservation and the survival of the planet. This is a better idea than the sustenance of an elite.

S.B.M. – Perfect, it's perfect, absolutely. Maybe you remember when we were speaking last time, the ecology movement was seen by some to be a kind of conservative movement that was trying to go back to the old ways and not develop but preserve things, even as reactionary. But now it's so clear that the global capitalist neo-liberal economic order is precisely engaged in the destruction of the environment. So there's no difference between those whose first concern is the environment and those whose first concern is the austerity that goes out to citizens, the 99%, in order, as he says, for the very few to

benefit. This is what has really shifted, that these interests of these six billion people have actually become one interest.

Can I ask you a question? And maybe this is a provincial question because I come from the United States which has been engaged in a very long war. Peace: peace movements do not seem to be spoken about much by this new political emergence. Peace, the end of war, this kind of concern, of course for me in the country which has waged war and is inventing new weapons to wage war, - drones as the major example- this is very high on my concerns. But whether it's Gezi or other demonstrations, this issue is not as pronounced and I'm curious as to why.

Ö.M. – That's true. Well as a radio stations in some of our programmes we try to discuss and protest against all these things. For example in our main news programme which is called Open Newspaper (Açık Gazete) we always try to underline especially the disastrous results when we report on these. The most recent example is that of a Pakistani girl who was a witness in the US Senate I believe and what she simply said was staggering actually. Because she said, « Before, I and my friends, everybody in fact thought something good would come out of it. Uprooting the terrorists and so on. But after such a long time I am now anxious about my own life and my friends' lives. » So this is something very real, I mean it's not only a matter of war and peace any longer, it's a matter of life and death at each and every moment. But to come back to your question, I don't know, I would concur that it's not much covered in the daily mainstream media. So I don't know the main reason.

S.B.M. – I mean I do think that it is a step towards peace because people are not identifying as nation-states that are potentially opposed to each other. They are seeing a politics that crosses national lines and after all it is nation states that make war. So there is a way that the issue is not central perhaps for that reason. But I find that the capacity… and Russell Brand is an example, highlighting the ecological issue as the central one of an immediate solidarity among people, no matter how different they are. That's something new and the fact that it works in such a progressive way in localities … for politics I find this really exciting.

Ö.M. – Yes and for example Russell Brand goes on to say in the same article at the end : « To genuinely make a difference, we must become different, make the tiny longitudinal shift, meditate, direct our love indiscriminately and our condemnation exclusively at those with power. Revolt in whatever way we want, with the spontaneity of the London rioters, with the certainty to die of religious fundamentalists or with the twinkling mischief of the trickster. We should include everyone, judging no one, without harming anyone. The agricultural revolution took thousands of years, the industrial revolution took hundreds of years, the technological revolution took tens, the spiritual revolution has come and we have only an instant to act. »

S.B.M. – Oh, how beautiful.

Ö.M. – I think it's an amazing article really. So we are on the verge of a sort of a revolution, would you say ?

S.B.M. – Yes, but the question is « What about these structures of power ? » It's not so easy to wish them away but there seems to be … Russell Brand has a position for example, not to vote. Well, I think you vote anyway, you add layers of democratic construction, and some may be as simple as voting. But you add to them others which have nothing to do with voting. But it seems like … particularly the way social relations have changed because of the new technology – not the new technology alone- because the ways in which social relations have changed makes it possible for other spaces to exist, to co-exist without the destruction of power. You don't have to necessarily destroy power directly, you just ignore it in a certain sense and go into other spaces, and it seems to work.

One thing I think is very important and I don't know how good you are with your cell phone and your twitter etc. but I'm not very good, I'm not on Twitter and I'm bad on the cell phone. It's an age problem; you have to have done this from when you were three years old. And so there is now a moment of maybe ten years where young people have such an advantage, such a power advantage in their capacity to use the internet that they can make tremendous gains. And look, Obama tried to make this technological miracle work for Medicare, for this « Obamacare », for this new very modest kind of socialized medicine and he couldn't get it to work because it's all kind of bureaucratic. You know if he had just hired some people twelve years old maybe it would have worked much better. There is something in the new technology that is such an advantage for the younger generation. And not only that, also sometimes for underdeveloped countries, countries that never had telephone lines but now have direct access to cell phones. So this is also a very unique situation.

Ö.M. – Yes, I'm not very good at all with these and I don't use a cell phone.

S.B.M. – Oh, my husband too.

Ö.M. – Oh then we're friends, but of course I'm clever enough to keep very young people always at my side, you see. I have another young partner on my show, I don't like to call it show, it's my morning programme and this has always been based on a multi-generational basis. I started it with my son first, my real son, we had some very fiery discussions. You know, he was objecting like « dad, you can't say such things » and I'd answer « you brat » and that kind of thing. But it has always been like that so I do make use of their talents.

İ.M. – In our last interview on Açık Radyo you were mentioning the importance of the internet as a source of optimism for you. And in this second interview we are actually in this new phase of communication. In your conference at Boğaziçi University you were talking about the global crowd and you said that we as a part of this crowd are occupying the same time zone actually. So maybe the new front, the new resistance basically exists on the time level. You said that the

peace movement is not really loud but, you know, it's a new way of raising your voice so the effect of communication has maybe really changed the way of thinking about politics as well. So maybe we have to forget the old terms of politics and just go deeper into this new sphere.

S.B.M. – I think that's really interesting and it stresses also the element of the experience that all of us are having : one of surprise. The surprise is that some other space is opening up and the surprise is that we all –and that's what I mean by the same political time zone- we all seem to be in that same time zone, we all seem to be… you know there's no one who is behind or no one who is advanced, we are all there together in some sort of simultaneous political time and space. And so the anticipation of something new is new for all of us. It's not as if… even the old Marxist paradigm, surely the old Marxist paradigm thought that it was clear what the stages of history were and people had to experience these stages of development before they reached a goal that everybody knew was going to be socialism, right ? So even if the goal was known beforehand, it isn't. It's a constant invention, it's a constant experiment and this is the exhiliration I think. What's surprising in a way… I mean Taksim… there were a few days and they were really wonderful days of this new sensibility. And now it doesn't happen. It's not a matter of going back to Taksim, it's not that.

Ö.M. – It's probably the same with « Occupy Wall Street ».

S.B.M. – Absolutely. It's nostalgic to go back to that space. So forgetting that – as Russell Brand says « this is only the beginning »- it's just a beginning, that something is absolutely unknown and we have to have some courage to face it, and also optimism…

Ö.M. – Yes, he goes on to say, Russell Brand, « Take to the streets with the understanding that you aren't being seen or heard or represented isn't psychosis, it's government policy » he says and he ends the article with these words : « The revolution of consciousness is a decision. Decisions take a moment, in my mind the revolution has already begun. »

S.B.M. – It's so great and you know, he has such an interesting background to have turned around and used his talents and his fame for this Anonymous collective. I mean I think it's really good.

Ö.M. – Yeah, yeah, I mean I think we are sort of living in very exciting times I should say. As you just said at the beginning of our conversation it is very much hopeful. I think it was Rebecca Solnit who wrote that if you go into a fight you may win but if you don't it's guaranteed that you won't. So that's the same idea and nowadays wherever I look I read articles by some great people talking about the same thing : we are on the verge of a new revolution. And they use the word revolution, all of them actually. I mean we had the last article done by the Adbusters guys, with whom we had a wonderful conversation last May, just before the Gezi revolts, so we have to talk again.

S.B.M. – You know you mentioned Adbusters and they were important at a certain moment with my own work. They cut into it. This also is very important I think with the 150th anniversary of Boğaziçi University. The old model for freedom of speech is that you have an enclave where that happens and Boğaziçi has been that traditionally and that will remain. But at least in the United States – I believe the situation here is different, I certainly hope so- but in the United States in universities, freedom of speech is becoming more and more privatized. It doesn't mean freedom of speech in the sense of a public spirit, it means that you are non-government and therefore you can be taken over by the interests of multi-national corporations in fact. You are trained for jobs there and something very sad has happened with intellectual life. It has become professionalized. It repeats itself, it keeps it's ideas going and scares all the new professors: « You won't get a job if you don't do this or that. » It has become extremely irrelevant to public discourse. Very strong in the United States. And now that I'm in New York City, it's the University of the City of New York in fact, it's a public university, I'm having a totally different experience. I'm feeling much more of a role as a public intellectual. I think you have always had a strong tradition of public intellectual discussion in Turkey.

Ö.M. – Well, Professor Noam Chomsky said in an interview I had done with him more than ten years ago for Açık Radyo – and I think he was saying this for the first time- he said that as far as he knows Turkey is the only place where the public intellectuals take sides with the downtrodden all the time and taking all the risks. And he gave the very famous examples of Ismail Beşikçi, of Yaşar Kemal and of others.

S.B.M. – So you would agree with this.

Ö.M. – I would agree with this.

S.B.M. – Absolutely. It's too bad in the United States. But this space that's opening up now, gives intellectuals also a chance to speak in a different way, to speak with the global crowd or to speak as part of the global crowd and so that has changed the way we actually are able to work.

Ö.M. – And the Adbuster guys in their article titled « Revolution is a Rhizome» - and that's a manifesto for the year ahead- they simply say « Here at Adbusters we see three big tactical breakthrough ideas, three metamemes that have the power to veer this global train wreck of ours from its date with disaster. Make no mistake, the crash is a brutal world, a barbarian reality, it is a happening that none of us should seek out joyfully. Yet we cannot just go with the flow, sing with the speed and trust the inertia of our current economic doomsday machine. » So let's take to the streets.

S.B.M. – Wonderful language. That's wonderful language. You know we had a joke about this … I had this example that Walter Benjamin uses when he is talking about revolution. He says that Marx talked about revolution as the locomotive of history, pushing forward and Benjamin says that perhaps it is not, perhaps it is

the reaching of humanity, riding in that train, for the emergency break. So that's a very nice image. We're not just going to go in that direction, but that this direction is the wrong way and it's happening faster and faster because of the way the global economy itself is mediated by the new technology. But it's not the only use of technology, there is our use as well.

Ö.M. – You know there's also something very funny happening. We've been very much engaged with this struggle to slow global warming or this climate change thing and one of the people who is more and more into this is Naomi Klein. And just in the same issue of the New Statesman she also wrote an article about how « science is telling us all to revolt »….

S.B.M. – That's great !

Ö.M. - … and she gives a tremendous example, because some very respected scientists from the Tyndall Center in the UK -they're two writers, two climate scientists, one is Kevin Anderson and his partner is Allison Bowes- are saying that there is still time to avoid catastrophic warming but not within the rules of capitalism as they are currently constructed, « which may be the best argument we have ever had for changing those rules » says Naomi Klein.

S.B.M. – Yes, perfect, perfect.

Ö.M. – These scientists in their cold, scientific way of talking and writing, openly say that the remaining 2 degrees budget demands revolutionary change to the political and economic hegemony. It's his emphasis, you know.

S.B.M. – Well there we have it, there we have it. Yes this is it, it's not just a group of idealists here, they're realists who are for the revolution.

Ö.M. – Yes and you know Bill McKibben, whom I admire very much and who is a good friend of ours, from the 350.org, said something to the effect of what you just said. : We environmentalists have always been looked upon as radicals but we are the real conservatives who conserve nature and these Exxon-Mobil, Shell people are the real radicals tearing the whole world apart. So it's all topsy-turvy, language-wise too, don't you think ?

S.B.M. – Absolutely. And even left and right, I don't know what they mean exactly. You can't start and say « I'm on the left and therefore… » or « I'm an anarchist and therefore… » or « I'm a Marxist and therefore… » No, it can't go like that. We have to look at the actual situation. We are the empiricists, we are the realists, we are the ones who actually see what is happening and what has to change, or we will all suffer. We will all suffer and so therefore old debates of nationalism for instance, it's outdated. It was the problem that Obama faced. He got caught in the fantasy that his job was to save the nation and save Americans. You know when I say fantasy it's some old discourse that simply does not match the situation and it ends up with the immoral practices –which I'm sure he suffers by because he is a moral human being- of killing other people, doesn't

matter whom, because we have to keep America safe. And safe for what ? Well, safe for the dollar. And you know, safe actually for the system of which it still is the center but it's not the only center of capital. And I also think that the imperial language is no longer that significant. Because global capital is global. There is a 1% in Bebek, as well as in New York city, there is this 1% that is benefitting in whatever way supposedly –I don't want to hold Bebek totally responsible- but a certain kind of enthousiasm about the new wealth and the new capacity to consume : that's global. It's in Shanghai and it's in Rio de Janeiro and it's in Istanbul and it's in New York.

Ö.M. – So talking about that, there's a very recent report, I just read two days ago, according to the Forbes report Turkey now has the 7th biggest dollar millionaires in the world after Russia…

S.B.M. – That's interesting.

Ö.M. – … well not after Russia but after China.

S.B.M. – Well, that's it. This global wealth also brings us together because it's not just one country that's doing this, right ? It's a universal phenomenon. You get this system that's working very well for a minority, a small minority…

Ö.M. - …and everywhere.

İ.M. – By the end of the interview if we could redefine this term « trans-local », how would you differentiate it from the « global » so to speak, because it says so much about the situation.

S.B.M. – Shall I do this now ?

Ö.M. – I think we have a couple of more minutes left. Just a small question linking to what you have just been saying… Now Chris Hedges also writing about « our invisible revolution » just said « the Right in the U.S. has retreated into Christian fascism and the celebration of the gun culture. And the left, knocked off balance by decades of fierce state repression in the name of anti-communism is struggling to rebuild and define itself. Popular revulsion for the ruling elite, however, is nearly universal. It is a question of which ideas will capture the public's imagination. »

S.B.M. – Absolutely. That's so true. You know I tried to tell my students who are all on the left, « you have to listen to some of the complaints of the Tea Party because they're the same complaints. You can't just say 'oh, but they're, you know, they're Christian fascists', which is in a way true but it depends how they articulate their discontent. And that is a problem that intellectuals can contribute to, that thinkers can contribute to. I mean all of the language you have used, of Naomi Klein, or of Russell Brand or of the person whose name you have just read –I forget- they're all giving us ways…

Ö.M. – the last one was Chris Hedges.

S.B.M. - …Chris Hedges, yes of course… giving us ways to think about the present situation, the language to use and that language is really important. That's a job of reflection, it's an intellectual job. I think that this is the time for that kind of new language. And then you can include the 99% in your… and even those who have power, they are not happy.

İ.M. – Aren't they ?

S.B.M. – No, I don't think so.
Ö.M. – They're very much afraid I believe.

S.B.M. – They're afraid and the happiness that they have given is rather empty. And, you know, I know rich people who don't like to live in a society where there is such a difference between rich and poor. They don't want it either but not to say there isn't resistance for power, because of course there is.

Ö.M. – So, to go back to İlksen's question…

S.B.M. – So, if global is the word for global capital, let's say, or the global system of nation states that are really stuck in a way, they're not doing the job of any kind of transformation of the situation, then trans-local is precisely to go either under the radar of the global or over the radar or some other place and to have a more direct contact with groups whom we know to trust somehow, because we are fighting the same fight. And so trans-local, or trans-local commons or whatever, produces that awareness that it's not just the global intellectual exchange or the global organisation that we are building up about ecology or anything else, but a trans-local one that can work even in a small place of priests and nuns in Kentucky, you know. And you know about it and you're speaking on the radio in Istanbul about this movement. This is really a new situation.

Ö.M. – It's fantastic in a way.

S.B.M. – It's fantastic.

Ö.M. – So ? Anything to add ?

S.B.M. – No, except that it's always so exciting to be with you.

Ö.M. – Thank you, the feeling is mutual. Professor Susan Buck Morss we are very happy to have you back here at Açık Radyo after all those years. And you are always welcome here.

S.B.M. – Thank you.

İ.M. – Thank you so much.