

The Impacts of Neoliberal Urban and Identity Politics on Peripheral Low Income-Settlements in Turkey: The Case of Boğaziçi Gecekondu¹ Neighborhood of Ankara

Neslihan Demirtaş

Izmir University of Economics

Department of Media and Communication

Abstract:

This essay draws upon the empirical findings of a qualitative research that was conducted in Boğaziçi, an old “*gecekondu*” neighborhood of Ankara between 2003 and 2005. The research originally attempts to explicate how migrants from the very beginning of their settlement in the region, the late 1950s, have constructed and reconstructed these informal spaces by employing certain tactics, paradoxically in a quite embedded way with the modernist urban planning strategy. In this essay the focus will be on the period of post-coup *détat* including the years after 1980. The impacts of the neoliberal policies introduced by the military regime that have been effective until then on low-income settlements will be briefly discussed by a close reading of the changing context of social spatialization in Boğaziçi neighborhood. This reading also will give clues about why this neighborhood, unlike the estimates of the modernist strategy, has still not transformed into a middle class district with apartment houses although it was given a legal status by its integration into urban land market. In a sense, this essay provides insights about the empowerment of certain groups in the neighborhood in political and economic terms and the increasing power of local agency in defining the course of social spatialization vis-à-vis the realm of planning strategy and other less powerful groups in the neighborhood.

¹ *Gecekondu* literary means “built-overnight” and *gecekondu* refers to people living in *gecekondu* settlements. It refers to houses or settlements constructed on state or privately owned land without planning and/or construction permission through the efforts of migrants from the rural to urban areas.

The Impacts of Neoliberal Urban and Identity Politics on Peripheral Low Income-Settlements in Turkey: The Case of Boğaziçi Gecekondu² Neighborhood of Ankara

Neslihan Demirtaş

This essay draws upon the empirical findings of a qualitative research that was conducted in Boğaziçi, an old “*gecekondu*” neighborhood of Ankara between 2003 and 2005. Most of the “*gecekondu*” houses with their lands were legalized and given formal title deeds in the neighborhood by the mid-1980s. The lands were given permission for formal construction by then. Nevertheless, this neighborhood preserves its appearance as a classical *gecekondu* neighborhood with one-storey modest houses in small gardens. Constituting a paradox with this physical appearance, a lively market place of approximately 150 “*gecekondu*” shops selling national and international brands exists on two sides of the main street that cuts the neighborhood into two. The research originally attempts to explicate how migrants from the very beginning of their settlement in the region, the late 1950s, have constructed and reconstructed these informal spaces by employing certain tactics, paradoxically in a quite embedded way with the modernist urban planning strategy, its loopholes³ and the spatial contingencies as unintended consequences of these strategies.

This essay focuses on the findings of the research particularly regarding the period of post-coup *détat* including the years after 1980. The neoliberal policies introduced by the military regime and “urban entrepreneurialism”⁴ that have been effective until then transform the course of urban politics in a dramatic way. The impacts of this transformation will be briefly discussed in this essay depending on a close reading of the changing context of “social spatialization”⁵ in Boğaziçi neighborhood. This reading also will give clues about why this neighborhood, unlike the estimates of the modernist

² *Gecekondu* literary means “built-overnight” and *gecekondu* refers to people living in *gecekondu* settlements. It refers to houses or settlements constructed on state or privately owned land without planning and/or construction permission through the efforts of migrants from the rural to urban areas.

³ The modernist urban planning in Turkey was initiated by the huge planning project of Ankara city as the capital city of the Republic from a small Anatolian town in the 1930s. The attempt of Republican Regime to build a model city exposing modern urban space and lifestyle and the continuing effect of such radically modernist ideal create a big rupture between the “lived” and “conceived” space of the city. The loopholes of the modernist planning strategy have emerged as a result of the inconsistent urban policies; regularly pronounced amnesty laws for informal spaces with populist political concerns; the financial and technical incapability of the municipalities in charge of realizing the plan; favoritism operated in accordance with local government system and strategy’s general neglect of social composition and power structure in localities. Informal settlers of the city have tactically abused the loopholes in the strategical realm.

⁴ As stated by David Harvey (1989: 6), with the increasing effect of entrepreneurialism in urban governance, a proliferated group of actors who have interest in urban rent appear to operate within a coalition of forces and in such a context, urban government and administration have only a facilitative and coordinating role to play.

⁵ The term “social spatialization” is borrowed from Rob Shields (1991, 1998) as to refer the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of social imaginary and representations as well as real interventions in the form of social practices producing a built environment (Shields, 1991: 31).

strategy, has still not transformed into a middle class district with apartment houses, although it was given a legal status by its integration into urban land market. In a sense, this essay provides insight about the empowerment of certain groups in the neighborhood in political and economic terms and the increasing power of local agency in defining the course of social spatialization vis-à-vis the realm of planning strategy and other less powerful groups in the neighborhood. The local information about changing dynamics of power structure will hopefully provide clues for a need to develop renewed understanding of urban governance sensitive to the deprivation of certain groups.

The year 1980 can be considered as a breaking point in terms of the general political climate of Turkey. The course of launching neoliberal policies by the military regime in this year has close parallels with the general crisis of “embedded liberalism”⁶ in the world at the time being. Towards the end of 1970s the political unrest in Turkey was due to the economic crisis of stagflation emerging from this general crisis. The objective of security forces to suppress the civil unrest⁷ and serious conflicts between the extreme leftist and rightist groups in the public space of the country had corresponded well with the expected effects of neoliberal policies overtime in initiating a general process of depoliticization. In that respect, the suppression of radical politics in public space by means of military regime sustained a suitable environment for the implication of neoliberal policies in the coming decade. In return, further depoliticization of public space via neoliberal policies was expected to provide a secure environment by breaking up the longing for active politics, community bonds and claims and the replacement of political concerns with economic ones in individual lives in general.

⁶ Neoliberalism mainly diverts from embedded liberalism in state’s giving up the welfare policies. In embedded liberalism, “states actively intervened in industrial policy and moved to set standards for the social wage by constructing a variety of welfare systems (health care, education and the like)” (Harvey, 2005: 10, 11).

⁷ During the period between 1950 and 1970, Turkish economy experienced rapid growth. However, this growth was mainly financed by foreign debt. The unsustainable economic policies, low productivity and inability to control inflation prepared the ground for the economic and political crises for the period between 1975 and 1980. The rate of people who work in marginal sectors and being unemployed increased considerably in 1978 when compared to the late 1960s. The poverty experienced during those years eased the manipulation of *gecekondu* population by radical political parties. In other words, class based politics triggered the radical politicization of sectarian, ethnic and *hemşehri* differences in *gecekondu* society. Economic instability was accompanied with political instability in such a way that this period witnessed the extreme polarization of politics between right wing and left wing ideologies. A number of extremist youth groups on the left, and the Grey Wolves and fundamentalists on the right did not experience any trouble, recruiting youngsters who had few or no career prospects due to economic crisis (Zürcher, 1998: 276). The radical left considered the *Alevi*s as natural allies due to the affinity emerged from the egalitarian and humanist nature of *Alevi* belief system. “The fascist and religious extreme right, on the other hand, oriented their recruiting efforts on *Sünni* Muslims of the mixed regions by fanning their fear and hatred of the *Alevi*s, thus, provoking violent incidents.” (Bruinessen, 1996: 8) *Gecekondu* space like other places in cities was dominated by violence and struggle going on between these two extreme groups. The main difference of *gecekondu* spaces from other neighborhoods in the city is the close encounters between different sectarian and *hemşehri* groups in the spontaneously developed space of these neighborhoods.

The civil governments succeeding the military regime seem to contribute to this depoliticization process by their acknowledgment of neoliberal political agenda in general. By keeping the dialogue between the narratives of Boğaziçi residents regarding the post coup *détat* period and the general neoliberal strategy that had serious consequences for the social spatialization in urban space, it is possible to come up with certain tenets of transformation in low-income settlements in general.

The neoliberal strategy maintains its efficiency through a bundle of strategic acts. These can be listed as *the silencing of active politics by breaking up the trust relation between migrants*; the *pacification of leftist politics coupled by the empowerment of Sünni interpretation of Islam over Alevi*⁸; the *legalization of gecekondu land and its integration into urban land market as a commodity that is subject to the rules of real estate market with simultaneously formal and informal nature* and the *structural transformation of local government system with the policy of decentralization and authority given to municipalities*. These strategic acts have contributed to the spontaneity of spatialization in *gecekondu* settlements. The unintended consequences of these policies on the local level are linked, on the one hand, to the neoliberal urban land policies in a political environment that is dominated by favoritism and informal relations and on the other, to the identity politics operated by the strategical realm mainly around sectarian and ethnic issues.

The nature of the competing claims to neighborhood space between different ethnic, sectarian and *hemşehri*⁹ groups over time transformed with the neoliberal policies of the 1990s. Immediately after the military intervention, the course of social spatialization in the locality was governed mainly by the repressive surveillance strategies of military regime. The pre-coup period, the 1970s¹⁰ in the neighborhood contained an overdose of

⁸ There are two main sectarian divides in Turkey that are *Alevism* and *Sünnism*. *Alevi* people living in Ankara *gecekondu*s appear to be descendants of rebellious tribal groups that were religiously affiliated with the Sfavids (Bruinessen, 1996: 7). Their native language is Turkish and they have migrated from Central Anatolian provinces. The practices of *Alevism* greatly differ from the *Sünni* Islamic practices. Prayer (*namaz*), the fast in Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca and zakat that are binding duties of *Sünni* Islam are either not practiced by *Alevi* groups or practiced in different ways and times. *Alevi*s have their own practices like ceremonial meeting namely *Cem*. The ceremony is conducted in the place called *Cemevi* meaning Cem House. To be a good person and development of personal morality come before everything else in *Alevi* belief system and practices. The interpersonal relations within the community; their survival with mutual respect and appreciating good humane characteristics like, tolerance, equality and freedom constitute the backbone of *Alevi* ethical system. Before the 1950s where *Alevi* and *Sünni* people mostly lived in villages of their own, these identities had not led to any conflict-ridden situation between groups. However, after the 1950s with the intense rural-to-urban migration these identities came into close contact in *gecekondu* settlements constructed in the periphery of the cities.

⁹ *Hemşehri* refers to the people of the same hometown. Mostly *hemşehri* is used in daily life among migrants to denote the people of the same village or the same province.

¹⁰ This period signifies the moment where the residents of the neighborhood located themselves and their *hemşehri* community within the polarized identities of *Alevism* and *Sünnism* associated with leftist and rightist ideology respectively. Open fights and even incidents of killings had taken place between leftists and rightists in the public space of the neighborhood. *Alevi* residents of the neighborhood who were excluded from the most valuable and secure lands of the neighborhood both due to their latecomer position and due to the tactical acts of *Sünni hemşehri* communities in the early settlement period

spontaneity and violence between leftist and rightist militants who were mostly the residents of the neighborhood. The first local strategy of the military regime in order to silence radical politics was to utilize a secret information network by encouraging some migrants to report about their neighbors in the early 1980s. The neighboring relations between *Alevi* and *Sünni* families that did not take any severe damage even during the social upheaval of the late 1970s in the neighborhood were affected by this informing activity in a very negative manner in the 1980s. Mostly *Alevi* militants were put into jail as a result of this informing activity. The informing activity and a general fear of even talking about politics gave a great damage to community bonds (not only that exists within *hemşehri* communities but also between *Alevi* and *Sünni* neighbors) that had always constituted the main means to claim certain services from city officials.

The neoliberal economic policies that were implemented as a second macro strategy bring about the prioritization of economic concerns for families in the neighborhood for two reasons. First, migrants began to suffer from financial problems due to the changing nature of job market and increasing unemployment. Second, the legalization of *gecekondu* lands and houses within the framework of neoliberal urban policies brought the possibilities of considerable profits out of real estate, particularly for the early comer migrants who may benefit from their established positions as having more than one shop or house and having known influential people in critical political positions. The reforms of decentralization in local government system¹¹ did not only bring a general increase in real estate values in the locality with legalization but also led to a more reciprocal relationship between migrants and local politicians. The increasing power of migrants in influencing the strategical acts of developing plans or providing certain services to the locality seems to be the defining quality of this period.

Thirdly, as part of the strategic act of suppressing active politics in general, military regime initiated and civilian governments succeeding carried out the privileging of *Sünni* interpretation of Islam as an antidote to ideologies of Marxism and Kurdish separatism. In congruence with this strategy, the practice and effect of *Sünni* Islam had become widespread in everyday life of the neighborhood. Particularly after the mid-1990s, low-income settlements have become the main supporters of religiously oriented conservative political parties. In parallel to these developments, in the narratives of the migrants about the 1990s, *Alevism* and *Sünnism* are taken place mainly with reference to the religious content of these identities. However, this awareness of the sectarian identities with their religious connotations signifies the re-politicization¹² of these identities as the main determinant of spatial competition over the public space of the neighborhood.

supported mainly leftist politics during the 1970s. On the other hand, *Sünni* migrants supported extreme rightist and ultra nationalist politics as appropriated. Interestingly leftist groups took the control of the public space of the neighborhood during this period due to the limited capacity and the intention of state security forces (favoring rightists mostly) to intervene in the violent incidents. Due to the limited interventions of state forces, the *Sünni* shop owners who had the power to take effective near-strategical decisions in defining the course of social spatialization in the previous decades point out their sufferings and repression of leftist militants more when compared to other shop owners in the late 1970s.

¹¹

¹² See Erman and Göker, 2000.

All these strategies have led to a transformation in the course of social spatialization in the locality from the “space of politics”, a space of open political struggles between leftists and rightists to a “politics of space”, a more implicit competition between *Alevi* and *Sünni* or different *hemşehri* groups embedded in the production and utilization of public space. The legalization of the lands by the hand of district municipality and the private construction offices under oath initiated the operation of favoritism towards certain groups in compliance with the sectarian identity of the officials in charge and migrants. The struggle given to get legal right to their lands and houses with best possible conditions vis-à-vis one’s neighbors and “other” groups constitutes the main theme in the memories of the migrants referring to the 1980s. In that respect, the process of getting title deeds, naming schools and parks in accordance with sectarian sensitivities, the placement of open bazaar places, the provision of services like restoring the roads, public buses, electricity and water, the construction of mosque or *cemevi* all constitute a matter for nepotistic concerns and become subject to a competition between *Alevi* and *Sünni hemşehri* communities as narrated by migrants.

The domination of social democrat mayors in local politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Boğaziçi and many low-income neighborhoods has put particularly *Alevi* communities in an advantageous position for a short time to use their political connections in the appropriation of space vis-à-vis other groups. However, from the mid-1990s on until now, Islamist conservative tradition dominates the local politics. In 1994 and 1999 local elections, *RP* (Welfare Party) won a considerable victory in low-income settlements of the largest cities of Turkey. The consequence of this victory for Boğaziçi neighborhood has been the empowerment of *Sünni* conservative shop owners who had already benefited a lot from the legalization process due to their early comer position and thereby their appropriation of big plot of lands on which they built more than one *gecekondu* house or shop. The early comer migrants, who had a chance to appropriate larger plots of lands and the shop owners, who benefited from rental revenues of the shop and the lively atmosphere of the market place, gained considerable economic and political power beginning by the 1980s. Interestingly, empowerment of shop owners particularly contributed to the spontaneity of social spatialization in the neighborhood, as in the form of spatial resistance to the mainstream tendency of apartmentalization in low-income settlements in general.

AKP (Justice and Development Party), the successor of Welfare Party gained a considerable victory in 2002 national elections and sustained the continuity of Islamist and conservative domination in local politics. Notwithstanding the strong appeal of the party leaders to urban poverty and the sufferings of low-income settlers on the discursive level, they continued to carry the neoliberal policies that have opened urban lands to private capitalist interests. They supposed a transition from the city of small capital to big capital in that sense. However, as Işık and Pınarcıoğlu (2001: 128) argue, the Turkish city of post-1980 period embraced many aspects that were not under the impact of big capital. Rather when urban poor is taken into consideration, the sovereignty of informal relations seems to be still valid. The informal relations seem to be the main cause of the unpredictability of the neoliberal capitalist territorial

organization in Turkish cities. As put by Brenner and Theodore (2004: 8) free from the market value of certain land, neoliberal capitalist territorial organization is always unpredictable and deeply contested because social attachments to place persist as people struggle to defend the everyday practices and institutional compromises from which capital has sought to extricate itself. Local actors may resist the neoliberal act of “creative destruction”¹³ not only to defend everyday practices or as a result of their emotional attachment to *gecekondu* space but also for the fact that durability of the built environment as it is can be more beneficial for its holders. This can be considered as an explanatory factor for the late apartmentalization in Boğaziçi neighborhood.

There are, in fact, two main reasons behind the late apartmentalization in the neighborhood. Firstly, big capital develops interest in peripheral settlements, which have a favorable location to other high-income residential areas. Many low-income neighborhoods like Boğaziçi are not favored by big capital due to their location in the city. The small-scale contractors have no longer been active in shaping the city by constructing individual apartment houses¹⁴ because they have been disabled by the increasing interest of the big capital in urban land (Doğan, 2007: 72). The second reason for late apartmentalization in Boğaziçi is the shop owner’s unwillingness to lead apartment construction. Due to the spatial necessity of initiating apartment construction from the edges of the main street in the market place and shop owner’s empowerment in financial terms have made them the powerful agency in determining the course of apartmentalization process in the locality. Traditional *gecekondu* shops are so small that there can be three or four shops on the same plot owned by a shop owner, which make the rent earnings of the shop owners quite satisfactory from these shops. This finding of the research is supported by the cases in many Third world cities as put forward by Davis (2006: 83) that the legalized squatting in Third World cities triggers “*slumlordism*” as a fact where the rent revenues from slum areas may be profitable when compared to invest in some other places in the city.

Unlike the estimates of the neoliberal strategy, the legalization of *gecekondu* houses did not bring necessarily the attraction of large construction firms, which are willing to invest on the peripheral lands on which low-income settlements had already been established. On the contrary, as Erder (1996: 158) mentioned, the preparation of construction plans and their application bring settledness of all social layers and power structure in *gecekondu* neighborhoods as they are. The planning attempts and applications tend to protect the existing structure as it is and this conserves the legal small parcels as they are which, in turn, avoids the entrance of the big construction firms to such low-income neighborhoods. Therefore as pointed out by Erder (1996: 158) elegantly, the new physical and social relations emerged after legalization in such

¹³ This concept is developed by Brenner and Theodore (2002, 15). According to the authors, the actually existing neoliberalism should be analyzed with reference to two dialectically intertwined but analytically distinct moments: “the (partial) destruction of extant institutional arrangements and political compromises through market-oriented reform initiatives; and the creation of a new infrastructure for market-oriented economic growth, commodification, and the rule of capital”. (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 15)

¹⁴ The middle and upper middle class neighborhoods of Turkish cities inhabit apartment houses. Particularly from the 1940s until the mid-1980s small contractors built these apartment houses by having a bargain with landowners.

neighborhoods hinder two groups on the extreme poles, the poor and big capital from entering the real estate market in these regions.

These developments not only bring an uneven development for different low-income settlements but also lead to the solidification of social inequalities within the neighborhood between different *hemşehri* and/or sectarian groups. Islamist understanding of local governance that makes the issue of poverty as the main axis of its political discourse paradoxically operates very strict neoliberal agenda vis-à-vis urban lands. In fact, the philanthropic acts of the Islamist municipal tradition seem to be quite in harmony with its neoliberal interests. They help the poor population in low-income settlements with a coalition of private and public actors, which is called as an “artificial publicity” in Doğan’s (2007) terms. This policy helps them to utilize these philanthropic acts in the service of their populist concerns and at the same time, they distribute the benefits of the system to certain groups concerning sectarian identities. As an example, the main complaint of poor *Alevi* residents of Boğaziçi is not being able to get bread for free, which is a service of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality of *AKP* party. The reason for that is the unwillingness of *Sünni* local officials to give these people the document proving their poverty.

The combined effects of these factors in the 1990s led to the solidification of the economic, political and social deprivations of certain groups, particularly the latecomers or/and tenants or/and *Alevi* migrants in the neighborhood. This deprivation can be more critical in illegal residential settlements that were built rapidly and illegally mainly as a consequence of forced migration¹⁵ in largest cities of Turkey by the 1990s. In that respect without having local knowledge of social spatialization in these localities, it is not possible to develop inclusive, participatory, democratic and successful planning and urban policies. It becomes even more crucial to develop a more inclusive and democratic understanding of local governance after this neoliberal phase in urban governance, which increase the social and economic inequalities dramatically between more powerful migrant groups and latecomer, “ethnically other” less powerful groups.

¹⁵ Forced migration is either the forced deportation of the villagers, being Kurd in ethnic origin by state security forces or their unprepared sudden decision of rural-to-urban migration as a consequence of the conflicts between state security forces and *PKK*, a separatist group seeking to establish an independent Kurdish State in the southeastern part of Turkey. Forced migration dominated rural-to-urban migration starting from the early 1990s. As a result of forced migration mainly, there emerged another type of peripheral low-income settlement that has been illegally built beginning by the 1980s with the extremely rapid rural-to-urban migration to large industrial cities such as İstanbul, İzmir, Diyarbakır, and Mersin. These newly emerged low-income settlements reflect a scene of disorganized two or three story houses with an amorphous and unfinished appearance

Literature

- Brenner, N. and Nik Theodore. N. 2002. "Cities and the Geographies of Actually Existing Neoliberalism." in Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, eds., *Spaces of Neoliberalism*. Blackwell Publishing, 2-33.
- Bruinessen, Martin.V. July/September 1996. "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey," *Middle East Report*, 7-10.
- Davis, Mike. 2006. *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso.
- Dođan, Ali Ekber. 2007. *Eđreti Kamusalılık: Kayseri Örneđinde İslamcı Beldiyecilik* (Artificial Publicity: Islamist Local Governance in Kayseri). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- Erder, S. 1996. *Ümraniye: İstanbul'a Bir Kent Kondu* (Ümraniye: A City was Settled Upon İstanbul). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları
- Erman, Tahire and Emrah Göker. 2000. "Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies*. 36(4): 99-118.
- Harvey, David. 1989 "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism". *Geografiska Annaler*. 71(1), 3-17.
- Işık, Ođuz, and Melih Pınarcıođlu. 2001. *Nöbetleşe Yoksulluk* (Poverty in Turn). İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- Shields, Rob. 1991. *Places on the Margin*. London: Routledge.
- Shields, Rob. 1998. *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics*. London&New York: Routledge.
- Zürcher, Eric. J. 1998. *Turkey: A Modern History*. London& New York: I.B. Tauris.