

Deniz Yonucu

PhD Student, Department of Anthropology, Cornell University

From Workers to Criminals: Marginalization and Criminalization of the Urban Poor Populations of Istanbul

In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which the squatter populations of Istanbul, once the key actors of Turkey's working class struggle during the 1960s and 70s, are being exiled from political subject position. After briefly tracing the history of the squatters of Istanbul, I will argue that the squatters, who have always been regarded as marginal, are being re-marginalized under the sway of neoliberalism. And, this re-marginalization leads to the redrawing of Turkish citizenship boundaries, as well as "delegitimizing" (cf. Caldeira 2000) the citizenry of the squatters in Turkey. I will also argue that, in Turkey where race has not been an axis of domination, urban poor populations are not only criminalized but can also be racialized and thereby become the "constitutive outside"¹ of the modern bourgeois city fantasy of a state which imagines itself as a modern / western state. Hence, this paper is an attempt to understand the ways in which the Turkish state re-establishes its modern and Western image by Othering, criminalizing, racializing and de-humanizing urban poor populations who were once regarded as crucial elements of Turkish modernization and urbanization.

Turkish media has become increasingly obsessed with crime rates and criminal events in recent years.² The media's obsession is centered on crime of the lower classes, in particular petty crime such as thievery, burglary and pickpocketing. Moreover, what most interests the media are the criminal events that take place in Istanbul as the city plans to re-design itself as a World city. The news on crime declares a state of emergency and in this process Istanbul is being reconstituted as a "dangerous" place³. In newspaper crime stories, criminals are frequently portrayed as similar to wild animals and defined as savages to be killed without hesitation. And, there are many articles written by famous columnists indicating that there is no psychological, sociological or material explanation for the "criminal" events that take place in Istanbul.⁴ Hence, there were discussions on TV and in newspapers about the legitimacy of killing and injuring the criminals. And, there are number of stories about

¹ I use the concept of "constitutive outside" *a la* Butler. Butler defines it as "for there is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute 'outside', an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside', it is that which can only be thought –when it can- in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders" (Butler 1993:8).

² According to the records of the National Security Administration crime rates rose 86% in Istanbul during the last ten years. (<http://www.egm.gov.tr/asayis/istatistik.asp>) However, we cannot reach the changes in the crime rates of Turkey in the last ten years. Here are some examples from the newspaper headlines related to the topic: "It is becoming worse and worse" (*Sabah* July 05, 2003), "Crime is exploited in Turkey" (February 11, 2005 <http://www.ntv.com.tr/news/309168>), "Citizens are tired of crime" (*Sabah* November, 10, 2005.), "Crime rates are rapidly increasing" (*Vatan* June 18, 2005), "There are thieves everywhere" (*Vatan*, February 2, 2006.).

³ Some examples from newspaper headlines: "Istanbul is the Harlem of Turkey" (*Sabah*. July 27, 2003), "Istanbul is the city of fear" (*Vatan*. June 18, 2004). "Rapidly increasing criminal events in Istanbul make people afraid" (*Sabah*. February 15, 2005), "Istanbul is the heaven of crime" (*Sabah*. January 23, 2005.) "It is becoming worse and worse" (*Sabah* July 05, 2003, p.1.), "Crime is exploited in Istanbul" (February 11, 2005 <http://www.ntv.com.tr/news/309168>),

⁴ See: Meydan Itlere Kaldi", Fatih Altayli *Sabah*. November 09, 2005, "Vahsi Toplum Gecis", Ergun Babahan *ibid*, "Emniyetsilik Mudurlugu mu?" Ilker Sarier *ibid*.

criminals who are injured or killed by “innocent citizens” (see Yonucu: 2006, for a further discussion on the representations of criminals in the Turkish media).

Who Are The Criminals?

As the studies on the link between crime and poverty point out, the “old marginals” of society, those who were once deemed necessary as potential labor power to be exploited but whose labor is no longer needed, such as black underclass, rural migrants, (post)colonial migrants, are now, under the sway of neoliberalism, being criminalized, “re-marginalized” and redefined (See Bauman 1997, Caldeira:2000, Wacquant:2002). And as Bauman argues, “dangerous classes” are redefined as *classes of criminals* in neoliberal society. In Turkey, too, crime is being associated with the squatters who migrated to the big cities during the industrialization process of Turkey in the 1940s. The *squatter* neighborhoods have always been regarded as the places of the “marginal” in Turkey and *squatter* people have never been regarded as citizens or “proper” citizens. Different than the emerging citizen versus criminal division of today, the division in the past was citizen versus people. While the citizen implies the middle and upper class urbanites, the “people” refer to the squatters. A very well-known newspaper headline written fifty years ago points out this tension clearly: “*The people rushed onto the beach, so that citizens could not swim.*” The article tells that, citizens who are “civilized” and “modern” urbanites do not want to swim at the same beach as rural migrants because of their “uncivilized” habits. The citizens of course not only did not want to swim at the same beach as the people, but also they did not want to live in the same city with them. However, the rural migrants were needed as a cheap labor force to be exploited for the “development” of the country. Therefore, although they have been regarded as marginal and not yet civilized populations, they were permitted to stay in the city. And, it was believed that they would be civilized eventually.

However, by the 1980s the economic and the social structure of the country began to be reorganized according to the demands of neoliberalism. The large scale factories around the squatter neighborhoods moved to the peripheral areas and urban poor began to be excluded from the work and wage processes. During the same process, the squatter neighborhoods were renamed and redefined. In Turkish, the term that was used for squatter settlements was *gecekondu* and it can be translated to English as, “settled at night” or “perched on at night.” The term was found by the squatters themselves and was exported to the “center” and defines the way in which they were naming, describing, and hence owning their new settlement experiences. By the 1990s, the term *gecekondu* began to be replaced by “*varoş*.” The concept of “*varoş*” was first used and largely shaped by the mass media and it has strong pejorative connotations. To put it briefly, according to the *varos* discourse the urban poor are both culturally and politically marginal people who are not able to modernize and who support radical political organizations that threaten the existence of the state (Erman: 2001) So, according to this discourse and the discourse of “Other Turkey” which was invented during the same process, in the 1990s, the urban poor are harmful to city culture and to state ideology (Aksoy: 2001).

Squatter neighborhoods are, currently, under-going a redefinition process. They are no longer represented with reference to their cultural and political identity as it was in the 1990s. They, now, have begun to be associated with crime. According to the records of the National Security Administration, while crime rates rose 86% in Istanbul in the last ten years, they rose

285% in the 14 *squatter* neighborhoods of Istanbul.⁵ This statistic was widely circulated in the media in 2005. Increasing crime rates of Istanbul are being explained with reference to the “criminality” of the people who live in *squatter* neighborhoods. For instance, one famous columnist associates crime with the *squatter* neighborhoods and titles his article: “The Code Name of the Varos: Crime Rate 285%”.⁶ For him, the young people of “*varos*” who want to become rich easily are exclusively responsible for the rising crime rates in Istanbul. In other articles, squatter settlement areas are defined as the “viruses” that surround Istanbul and it is being asserted that the people of the squatter settlement areas do not have any “moral or humane values”, making them crime prone.⁷ Moreover, in one of the discussions at the Turkish National Assembly on the issue of crime, it was argued that the “*varos*” youth emulate those who are living in high standards and engage in crime in order to live like them.⁸ In effect, poor people’s so-called desire to be rich and their “moral depravity” have become the sole explanation of the rising crime rates in this new process. So, while the *squatter* neighborhoods of Turkey have begun to be associated with crime, the urban poor are being reconstituted as the “criminals” whose criminality cannot be explained by social and political terms. While by the 1990s they were labeled as members of the “Other Turkey”, which is not a part of the “normal”/ “real” Turkey, they are now being labeled as the “viruses” of the city whose existence is extremely dangerous for the “health” of the rest of the population, the “innocent citizens”.

As is argued, fear of crime and criminalization of the poor have facilitated urban segregation. As the cities are being associated “with more danger than safety” (Bauman 2005:73)⁹, spatial segregation between poor and non-poor is sharpening. The fantasies of the urban elite: “the city is an unpredictable and dangerous site of survival” (Diken and Laustsen 2005: 92) goes hand in hand with the fantasies of the city as a non-antagonistic unity. Thanks to a definition of urban poor as the absolute Other who certainly could not integrate into so-called city culture, some journalists and scholars as the representatives of the middle and upper class urbanites of Turkey are fantasizing a non-antagonistic city. However, the current government seems determined to turn the fantasy into reality. The urban transformation project that is on the agenda of the Istanbul Municipality aims to demolish the *squatter* neighborhoods of Istanbul and re-design the city as a “modern”, “civilized” and “secure” world city. According to Istanbul municipality major’s statements, the first and most important thing to be done to “re-create” Istanbul as a world city is to demolish the *squatters*.¹⁰ Hence, *squatter* neighborhoods are described as enemy lands in the prime ministers’ declarations, as he frequently emphasizes how determined the government is in its “struggle against *squatters*” to create a “modern” city.¹¹ Moreover, he defines *squatters* as tumors that surround Istanbul.¹² In effect, according to the policies of the current government there is no place for urban poor in Istanbul. According to the urban transformation project, *squatters* will be demolished and

⁵ information available at: <http://www.egm.gov.tr/asayis/istatistik.asp>

⁶ Mehmet Altan, “Kod Adi Varos: Suc Orani 285%”. *Sabah*. December 07, 2005.

⁷ See: “Bastirilmis Tuketim Duygusu” March 26, 2004 *Turkiye*, “Varos Kendinden Korkuyor”, November 9, 2005 *Yeni Asir*, “Cok ince Elersek Un Ufak Edebiliriz” November 22, 2003 *Sabah*, “Suc Istanbul’a Goc Ediyor” January 30, 2005 *Radikal*, . “Sürekli Vicdan Azabi cekerek yasiyorduk” May 19, 2004 *Sabah*.

⁸ Turkish National Assembly Reports. December 9, 2003. www.tbmm.gov.tr/meclistutanaklari/araklik00.

¹⁰ According to urban transformation project, all of the 11 *squatter* districts or neighborhoods will be demolished. These districts or neighborhoods are: Kartal, Ikitelli, Altinsehir, Tuzla, Kucukcekmece, Ayazma, Armutlu, Zeytinburnu, Kagithane, Maltepe (Dragos), Gunesli. *Yenisafak* November 30, 2005. There are more than 3.000.000 people live in these districts or neighborhoods (Information available at: http://www.istanbul.net.tr/istanbul_istanbul_nufus.asp). Yet there is still no accurate information about how many people will be displaced from these neighborhoods.

¹¹ See *Turkiye* April 13, 2006; *Turkiye* October 03, 2004; *Sabah* July 16, 2005; *Yenisafak* November 30, 2005.

¹² See *HaberX* April 08, 2006.

the urban poor who are living in *squatter* neighborhoods will be moved out of the city. And, the people who are resisting to demolishers are being represented in the media as criminals and terrorists who occupy the state's land and who benefit from facilities of city life that they do not deserve (Akçay: 2005). So, in this new process, any attempt by the urban poor to remain in the city will contribute to the "delegitimation" of their citizenship (cf. Caldeira: 2000).

Butler (2004) points out how the level of "dangerousness" that is defined by the state takes a human outside the bounds of law. Emphasizing the prisoners' condition at Guantanamo bay, she discusses that certain populations are dehumanized with reference to Western discourses of civilization and that violence against these dehumanized/animalized populations become legitimate. In a similar fashion, Mbembe (2003) in his article about the forms of sovereignty in the post-colony, argues that animalization of the "savages" legitimizes violence against these populations. He argues that, "the savages are, as it were, 'natural' human beings, who lack a specifically human character, the specifically human reality", and he continues with a quote from Arendt (1951); "so that when European massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder". Accordingly, the urban poor of Turkey are being animalized and biologized through various representations of crime in the mainstream Turkish media and as a result of this animalization and biologization process and due to the redefinition of the *squatter* people as "dangerous criminals", violence against urban poor is becoming increasingly legitimate and urban poor is being excluded from citizenry as well as humanity. The urban poor are not regarded as political actors, who have certain social and political demands, but as criminals. Hence, with the emergent association of crime and poverty, the "urban question" and poverty is becoming increasingly depoliticized and the urban poor become increasingly deprived of any subject position and social channels which would enable them to speak as "political subjects".

Inclusion-integration is no longer an ideal in contemporary Turkey. What we witness today is the end of the organic model of solidarity and the exclusion of the urban poor – who are seen as "viruses" or "tumors"- from the social body and social contract. In fact, this situation is not unique to Turkey. As is argued, the external enemy is being replaced by the internal enemy in the West (see Balibar 2004, Bauman 2005, Diken and Laustsen 2005). Poor immigrants of the Western metropolises, who were included as a cheap labor force in the past, are becoming surplus populations due to the neoliberal reorganization of the economy and as such are being regarded as "enemies" and as threats to "proper" citizens. As Hansen and Stepputat (2005) put it,

"[m]igrants are at the mercy of local forms of sovereignty and do frequently become the object of hateful pogroms and harassment by organizations claiming to protect interests and culture of autochthonous citizens of the respective states. The migrant and illegal alien is often linked to the anonymous and opaque dangers of the city and its underworld (s). Groups of 'diasporic' young men are increasingly perceived as security threats in the heart of Western metropolises" (35).

In effect, in the popular and official discourses, immigrants are not objects of sympathy and pity anymore. On the contrary they are seen as inherently violent and dangerous people. Thus, as Balibar (2004) points out, this association with dangerousness and poverty is "transformed into naked violence, particularly in the urban and suburban ghettos" (41). So, security, which is highly linked to violence, is becoming the main issue everywhere, and legal citizens do not

feel secure anymore because of the poor and “dangerous” immigrants. And thus, the immigrants who have become economically redundant are being regarded as “garbage humans to be thrown away, out of the city” (Balibar 2004:141). However, what is unique in the Turkish case is that, in the very absence of the “outsider” immigrant, similar exclusionist mechanisms operate against urban poor who are indeed official, legal citizens. Thus, it is not a coincidence that in the news reports about the uprisings in Paris, mainstream Turkish media associated *squatter* neighborhoods of Istanbul with Paris suburbs. And, some columnists wrote they also expect similar uprisings in the squatters of Istanbul. It is, again, not a coincidence that some young squatters identify with American Black sub-culture and imitate the clothing style of Black gang members.

I think that Calavita (2005) is right by offering a broader definition of citizenship that is beyond the dichotomy of citizen-member-insider and immigrant-stranger-outsider. As she argues, “not all foreigners are ‘strangers’ and not all citizens are members” (405). And, the state, in fact, needs strangers in order to define its real citizens; the “bearers of the sovereignty” (cf. Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Hence, as Caldeira (2000) argued, crime talk is productive; it produces the boundaries between citizens and non-citizens, or say, the legitimate citizens and “illegitimate citizens”. So, Turkish media’s obsession with crime, in fact, illustrates the redrawing of boundaries of citizenry in Turkey and also gives us clues about the new “enemy”, an “enemy” of a country which is currently trying to be a member of the European Union. Now, the enemy of the Turkish state and the urban middle and upper classes is similar to those of Western states and Western bourgeoisie: the “savage” and “uncivilized” poor immigrants. Of course, in relation to this new enemy, the urban middle and upper classes of Turkey feel more similar to the Western elites, whom they have idealized since the beginning of the Turkish Republic. In addition, this new “enemy” contributes to the constitution of a new image of the Turkish state as a Western state or as state that deserves to be a member of the EU.

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