

The polis keeps expanding: Are we any closer to *cosmopolis*?

by Eşref Aksu

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a quick snapshot of the first few hours of Herr Keuner's (Brecht 2004) stopover in Istanbul on his way back from Melbourne where he attended an interdisciplinary conference entitled *Towards A Cosmopolitan Identity?: Globalisation, Urbanisation, and Social Transformation*. Preoccupied with the question of how cosmopolitan the mega-urban areas are in the wake of globalisation, Keuner faces a difficult mixture of overlapping, cross-cutting, conflicting, and mutually reinforcing observations, analyses, perceptions, and value judgments.

Straight after his 3-day conference in Melbourne, Herr Keuner¹ had jumped on the plane, and headed back home via Sydney, Singapore, Bahrain, and now Istanbul. As Gulf Air GF043 started its descent, he caught a glimpse of the countless mosques from his window seat. The colossal minarets of these age-old mosques were dwarfed by the surrounding buildings in a less artificial yet more aggressive way than the ones he had seen in Bahrain. It was as if the numerous buildings here had merged to create a living organism, and were continuously expanding both horizontally as well as vertically, swallowing everything along their path. While this city would almost certainly be an embarrassment for those who argue that cities "are designed" (Short: 160), it also seemed to point, ironically, in the direction of "arcological" possibilities (Soleri 1969; Barnett 1995: 193).

An unpromoted sociology lecturer, Keuner had been lucky enough in his career to hold several teaching and research positions around the world. His last visiting fellowship, for example, had taken him to Mexico City last summer. He had loved every second of the six-month experience, but to be honest he could not possibly imagine himself spending his entire life in that crowded, polluted and crime-ridden city. He was especially happy, however, to have taken plenty of photos that he could now show to his German undergraduates to demonstrate what "social stratification" really meant, and

¹ Brecht's famous "Mr. Nobody" was developed between the 1930s and mid-1950s (see Brecht 2001 and Brecht 2004).

how people living within a few kilometres from each other might well be “worlds apart”.

Perhaps due to the occupational hazard of devoted academics, Keuner had not been able to leave the theme of his recent Melbourne conference behind, even after he boarded his plane for the return journey: *Towards A Cosmopolitan Identity?: Globalisation, Urbanisation, and Social Transformation*. This had been one of the most stimulating conferences he had attended in the last few years, partly thanks to a few thought-provoking presentations by some relatively unknown colleagues from the Third World, all of whom had first-hand experience with “urbanisation” with all that this implied in their respective social realities. The conference had been stimulating, however, also partly because of Melbourne’s refreshing and relaxing overall atmosphere, and because the conference theme had appealed to him not only professionally, but also at a deeper personal level.

Keuner had always considered himself a cosmopolitan. While he was not entirely sure why, how and when exactly he had developed such a self-perception, he frequently reminisced his conversations with his late grandfather, whom he always considered the original source of inspiration for his intellectual make-up, indeed for his career choice. In his day, Keuner’s grandfather had made quite a name for himself (Brecht 2001; Brecht 2004). A member of progressive intellectual circles in the inter-war period, he had always been a strange mixture of a middle-class defender of working-class rights, a provocative artist and a hopeless optimist (Milfull 1974). Keuner remembered well how his grandfather used to tell him stories about the transformative potential inherent in the cities. He could even trace the birth of his interest in sociology right back to the day when his grandfather told him all about the so-called “agrarian question” that had given rise to so much controversy in the SPD circles at the turn of the last century (Hussain and Tribe 1983; Trapeznikov 1981). His grandfather had no doubt whatsoever: Sooner or later there was going to be a social transformation for the better – and a worldwide transformation at that.

Meaningful social change was inescapably going to start *in* the cities and *with* the cities. Due to their very nature (mode of production, economic geography, socio-spatial configuration), the cities would lead to the elimination of irrelevant and archaic forms of identity, and to growing emancipatory tendencies between individuals, groups, and societies. Although from an entirely different analytical and normative viewpoint, the 1950s and 60s Modernisation School, among others, had great expectations of cities, too. If urbanisation was almost a natural ally for a meaningful cosmopolitanism, what could be possibly more desirable than mega-urbanisation?

Throughout his flight from Melbourne, Keuner kept thinking: How cosmopolitan are the mega-urban areas in the wake of globalisation? At the back of his mind was the rhetorical question posed by a young Tamil colleague at the conference: “Utopian thinking on ‘good city’ is well and good (Friedmann 2002: 103-118; Magnaghi, 116-22). But do you honestly think that *I* – a minority member, living exactly in Appadurai’s (2002) Mumbai – am ever likely to take you seriously?” Although Keuner did his best to stay focussed in his reflections, he got frequently interrupted by other thoughts, images, and split-second diversions, all of which, interestingly, turned out to be relevant to his problematique. Each time a drink or meal was being served on the plane, for instance, he could not help but wonder whether, to what extent, and with what implications, the stewardess in her standard Gulf Air uniform, i.e. wearing a loose headscarf, could be a “cosmopolitan”. Judging by her looks and accent, and overhearing some of her conversations with her colleagues, Keuner was convinced that she was of “Anglo” background, and permanently headquartered in Bahrain. When he thought about how, if at all, *her* reality would conform to “state-centered”, “cosmopolitan” and “insurgent” models of citizenship (Friedmann 2002: 67-86), he felt a connection deeper than he expected with the Tamil presenter’s remark. *Who* precisely occupies *which* city within *what sort* of socio-economic structures, and creating *what kind* of socio-political realities? If anything, Georg Simmel would have found it even more difficult today to classify the people in

Potsdamer Platz (Sennett 2002: 43). Does such diversity contribute to, or actually take away from, an emerging urban cosmopolitanism, and, indeed, a positively transformative potential?

After a successful landing, just before disembarkation, Keuner found himself unconsciously whistling along the in-cabin music: “I’m a legal alien; I’m an Englishman in New Yooork” (Sting 1987). Soon he realised that he knew the feeling very well. He had not noticed until then quite so strongly that parochial feelings of belonging could be prominently at play even in the supposedly most cosmopolitan and most inter-connected “world cities” such as London and New York (Newman and Thornley 2005). Just when he was starting to be completely immersed in his thoughts again, he found himself at the gates of Atatürk Airport. “Those who keep talking about a borderless world”, he thought as the officer was carefully checking his passport, “should be made to listen to Sting, and at a passport checkpoint!”

Keuner always took pride in his own non-touristy attitude. Over the years, he had made it into a habit to “do as the locals would do” whenever and wherever he travelled. Following passport control, it would take Keuner some three hours to reach his hotel by public transport. He had made a random online booking with a hotel in Üsküdar, i.e. on the Anatolian side of the city, rather than somewhere on the so-called “Historical Peninsula” – a designation that he would soon discover was largely an invention of tourist guidebooks. Since he had arrived in Istanbul only ninety minutes before the actual rush hour, he was bound to get stuck in the middle of a commuter traffic shortly. At that point he remembered what an Indonesian friend had once told him: “We stopped making appointments in Jakarta a long time ago. There is simply no credible way of telling when we can reach where!” In order to catch the ferryboat to Üsküdar, first his bus needed to arrive at Eminönü. What he found particularly striking during his trip to Eminönü were the ugly buildings lined up on both sides of the highway. Most of them were not painted, and did not have regular roofs. Several of them were not even properly “finished” in terms of basic construction. “That’s the megacity for

you”, Keuner thought, “nothing more than a shanty town”. He was not entirely sure what sort of characteristics he could attribute to the people occupying these dwellings. “Cosmopolitanism?”, he asked himself, “Can I really expect this sentiment to flourish *here*?”

He had to wait for approximately 30 minutes in crowded Eminönü to catch the next boat to Üsküdar. Just when he was starting to enjoy the sight of the beautiful Bosphorus, he suddenly noticed some ten or twelve street peddlers packing their portable tables in a hurry and starting to run with unbelievable speed, all in the same direction. His facial expression must have revealed that he did not quite understand what was going on, as a modern-looking young boy unexpectedly addressed him in clear English. “The municipal officials”, the boy said, “are hunting down the peddlers. They don’t have a work permit.” Apparently, if these people were not quick and skilled enough to disappear into the crowd, they might face considerable difficulty at the hand of officials – that is to say, if they had not mastered the art of bribery. It was striking, however, how well their entire run-away was organised. No doubt, the street salesmen operated as a community, and had even some members on constant look-out. There was no way that they could survive a raid such as this one, had they acted alone. “Well, a meaningful community need not be based on religion, ethnicity, or even family I guess” (Badcock: 171-202) muttered Keuner, when the two were finally boarding the ferry.

The boy, Keuner soon learned, was a student at one of the private universities in Istanbul. “Don’t get me wrong: This is one of the most beautiful cities in the world,” he told Keuner, “but it is also full of serious problems.” He was speaking with a certain air of authority. Having heard a few phrases and examples he used in his comments, Keuner was convinced that he belonged to a well-to-do family, and had already travelled almost as much as Keuner had managed in his long academic career. The boy was clearly informed of what was going on in the world, where, and how. “Not *everyone* can easily survive in Istanbul” the boy said. “You really need to earn a lot of money to be able to enjoy this city.” The boat was passing by the

famous Maiden's Tower (*Kız Kulesi*) when he said this. While listening to him, Keuner was also scrutinising the three sides of Istanbul from probably the best possible spot, that is, right from the middle of the sea. The city had an unmistakable natural beauty. Nevertheless, for a brief moment at least, he could not help but feel just like several inhabitants of this huge city: entrapped. The vertically and horizontally expanding organism he had seen from the air physically surrounded him now. Luckily, unlike the inhabitants, he had an onward airticket on hand, which probably made it easier for him to concentrate on the exciting bits of the city.

While most of the buildings in sight were utterly poor in almost every sense of the word, several buildings that caught his eye were really lavish. It occurred to Keuner that he had not seen this many excessively lavish buildings in Melbourne. The boy's words, coupled with his own on-the-spot observations, created a somewhat uneasy feeling in him. "You see", the boy continued, "in fact there are few proper jobs in this city. No proper housing, no infrastructure. But it keeps growing. Somehow everything in this country revolves around here. People keep coming. And the more they come, the bigger *their* problems become, too. Not even the big earthquake of 1999 has scared people off. Property prices have skyrocketed since. Did you know: Istanbul is considered by public officials a 'place of exile'. No one on regular state salary – no teacher, no policeman, no judge – wants to be assigned to Istanbul. They would barely survive here." While the boy did seem to make sense and was not particularly pretentious or anything, Keuner could not help but wonder *whose reality precisely* the boy was in fact talking about.

As they were approaching the first Bosphorus Bridge (*Boğaziçi Köprüsü*), some of the multi-million-dollar mansions on both sides of the Bosphorus were also slowly becoming visible. "Don't be fooled, though," the boy warned him meanwhile, "Remember the guys who just ran away from the municipal police? Many of them earn much better than people on good salaries. It's not easy to get an informal peddler's spot in Eminönü. Those spots are like gold." An interesting picture of Istanbul was emerging in Keuner's mind as the boy

went on. This picture was clearer than before in some respects, but more ambiguous in others. The livelihood of numerous people in this city, it seemed, revolved around a multifaceted informal economy. In the absence of any realistic prospects for wealth-creation, but also partly due to a growing opportunism that was not easy to explain, many people were in fact actively *aiming* to be part of the informal economy. They just did not quite have the chance, because informal economy, too, had its own dominant set of rules.

Istanbul was another textbook example of how parochial ties of identity could interact with economy (Rana and Piracha 2007: 28-30). The boy told Keuner about a newspaper article he had read that morning. The two dominant gangs in the Istanbul wholesale fruit-and-vegetable market had clashed again the night before; several people were wounded. All members of one of the gangs were from the same East Anatolian city, while those of the other gang came from another city in Southeast Anatolia. Above and beyond its implications for the growing sense of physical and economic insecurity in Istanbul's daily life, this event also exemplified how "individuality" could get practically suppressed under existing socio-economic conditions. "Belonging" to a particular group could be simply a matter of survival for a person. Yet such belonging could also quickly start to aim at more than just survival; it could seek dominance in unforeseen ways. Every resident of Istanbul knew, for example, that carparks, shopping malls, certain business districts, and some commercial sectors were all monopolised by their respective "mafia"s.

When the ferry reached Üsküdar, Keuner began to notice the religious face of Istanbul. While the Üsküdar square was full of a mixture of people from all walks of life, there was a noticeable increase in the number of women wearing headscarves and men with long beards. "Üsküdar, along with Fatih on the other side, is reputedly more conservative than many other parts of Istanbul," the boy said as he was walking Keuner to his hotel, "in some parts you wouldn't dare to wear shorts or something during summer." There were, in other words, some religious ghettos right in the middle of Istanbul, but other ghettos existed as well. Gülsuyu Mahallesi, for example, was one of the

typical leftist slum areas, witnessing periodic ideological clashes. At the other extreme, though, so-called “satellite cities” had flourished all over Istanbul for upper-middle-class families, slowly replacing more traditional wealthy suburbs. These divergent communities were part of the same growing organism; in many respects they shared the same problems and the same destiny; but, at the same time, they were worlds apart, each with its own respective set of identities, its own *modus vivendi*, and its own interpretations of the past, present, and future. The different segments within Istanbul seemed to have much more in common with their respective counterparts in Mexico City than with each other. “If one disassembles the national and the global” (Sassen 2006: 312-9), Keuner wondered, “where does the megacity *meaningfully* fit?”

For Keuner, Istanbul was an intriguing place, and perhaps worth staying for a while. However, he just did not feel any intimate connection with it – just like in Mexico City. No wonder he had found himself repeatedly shocked and disappointed over the years, when confronted by the same problem-cycle in the same type of city, as if he were re-living a *Groundhog Day* (Ramis 1993). Shortly after he said goodbye to the boy, he unexpectedly realised to have completely overlooked a more fundamental problem: Cosmopolis, if it was to exist or emerge (whether in space, in thought, or in emotions), *had to* connect insiders with outsiders. “How on earth do these megacities impact on *me* – an outsider?” Keuner asked himself, “*Am I* a cosmopolitan? The polis keeps expanding everywhere, but are we getting any closer to *cosmopolis*?”

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