The Scale of Public Space:

Taksim Square in Istanbul

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A B S T R A C T

This article aims at following the traces of the transformation of public sphere in Turkey through its manifestations on urban public spaces with the case study of Taksim Square. In this attempt, the article illustrates how Taksim square, as a public space, has been shaped by struggles between different ideologies, discourses, political decisions and daily activities taking place at personal, interpersonal, local, national, supranational and global scales. Through this way this article also aims at understanding how these contestations at different scales are affecting people, individually and collectively, from daily life practices to political integration. The article also discusses that our daily life practices and preferences are political decisions and our participation in public sphere occurs through those daily actions of the personal spheres. Therefore, the article suggests that a paradigm shift is needed in the design and production of the built environments that will facilitate the coexistence of multiple counter publics.

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1. Introduction

Today the role of public spaces in the exchange of ideas and creation of public opinion has started to be discussed extensively. Public spaces such as Tahrir Square in Egypt, Sintagma Square in Greece, the buffer Zone in Cyprus, or the Azadi Square in Tehran have more than what they occupy as physical spaces. Images reflecting those huge urban areas with millions of people inside are circulating all over the world through news agencies or social media, as the messengers of new social orders or new regimes.

Those images help to create and sustain a feeling of strong resistance and solidarity through the representation of the materialization of political ideas with real people and real places in them. Although it is impossible to deny the importance of internet and social media in the formation of public opinion, organization of protests and demonstrations, and circulation of

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news and information, the need for the physicality of place (a public space), and the power of thousands of people interwoven together occupying that space cannot be ignored. In the end, all those images shared in digital media illustrate real people and real places (Parkinson, 2012).

These political activisms on urban spaces are becoming visible by the help of internet, and media at a global scale. They illustrate the collective resistance of certain people at certain locations, which might have global impacts at other localities. Although they do not represent the "ideal speech condition" that Habermas suggests as the rule of public sphere they are probably the utmost reflections of public opinion (Habermas, Lenox, & Lenox, 1974). And again, in contrast with Habermasian ideal of public sphere, which is related with public opinion and manifested in language, these activisms are highly visible through their existence on urban spaces (Parkinson, 2012).

As much as the spatiality of public spaces, the scale issue is also important because the physical public space is being shaped as a result of struggles between different ideologies, discourses, political decisions and daily activities taking place at personal, interpersonal, local, national, supranational and global scales. Therefore, these contestations at different scales are blurring established definitions of normative public sphere, and defining new and alternative spheres of public expression in several forms, ranging from performing daily life activities to participating in political life in passive and active ways. These alternative spheres of public expression, formed at the intersections of different scalar relations of public life create what Nancy Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublic" (Fraser, 1990).

Having the idea that public spaces constitute an indispensable part of public life, and play an important role in the formation of public opinion, this article aims at following the traces of the transformation of public sphere in Turkey through its manifestations on urban public spaces with the case study of Taksim Square in Istanbul. In this attempt, the article tries to understand the changing meanings attached to the square as a major public space, not only at urban scale but also at personal, interpersonal, national and global scales. Therefore, the article looks at the ways how the square has been formed, used, transformed and appropriated by different ideologies, discourses, political decisions and daily life activities of different groups. It also looks at the ways how political and ideological pressures are materialized at urban spaces and how these materializations are being contested through different forms of public expressions ranging from collective protests to daily life activities and preferences in the use of urban space. The article aims to understand whether or not these contestations open the way for new forms of public spheres, which might be called as multiple counter-publics with reference to Nancy Fraser, and whether or not the physicality of the urban space in terms of inscription of meanings and transformation of those meanings through appropriation of the space, has impacts on this formation of new types of public spheres.

2. CONSTRUCTING THE NATIONAL SPACE, DEFINING THE NATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE IN TURKEY

2.1 Imagination of a Modern Nation State

The foundation of the Turkish Republic as a new nation-state in 1923 was a break from the imperial Ottoman past through a modernization project. One of the most important aspects of the nationhood was constructing a Turkish citizenship within defined boundaries (Secor, 2004). This modernization project was inspired by the Western norms, and paralleled by secularization and homogenization of the country (Kasaba, 1997). The visual representations of the period in printed publications such as journals, books and posters depicting:

> *"[u]nveiled women working next to clean-shaven men in educational and professional settings, healthy children*

and young people in school uniforms, the modern architecture of public buildings in republican Ankara and other major cities, the spectacular performances of the national theater, symphony orchestra, opera, and ballet, and proud scenes of agriculture, railroads, factories, and dams…" (Bozdoğan & Kasaba, 1999; p:5)

provides an understanding of how the modernist-nationalist project was determined to create a homogenous, national identity which is reflected in a variety of fields ranging from the outfit of citizens, to the newly emerging cultural practices, from women participating in the economic production to the modernist architecture and urban design of the nation state (Bozdoğan, 2001; Bozdoğan & Kasaba, 1999).

2.2 Constructing National Identity through Architecture

As for Alev Çınar, one of the most important priorities of the ruling elite of the new nation state was to define a national territory, in order to materialize the power and dominance of the new regime and its national ideology and create a feeling of a "unified national territory" (Çınar, 2005; p: 101). She states that "nationhood is not only about the collective imagination of a national community, but also about the imagination of national space" (Çınar, 2005; p: 99). Therefore, architecture and urban design became an important tool to convey those ideals on the physical space. One of the most important decisions implemented on the national space was the relocation of the capital from the former imperial capital Istanbul, to a small town in central Anatolia, Ankara. This move was the spatial reflection of the intention of a break with the Ottoman and Islamic heritage of the past (Bozdoğan, 2001). In order to institutionalize the reforms and make them effective in the level of everyday life, the state searched for a model that would replace Istanbul's urban and cultural heterogeneity with

a modern and homogeneous urban environment (Şengül, 2001).

Urban planning and construction works initially started in Ankara, and then spread to other Anatolian cities. New governmental buildings, schools, factories and housing complexes were built in accordance with modernist architectural style; new urban open spaces such as boulevards, parks, promenades and squares were opened and the reflections of the new regime were inscribed in them by erection of monuments and statues (Bozdoğan, 2001; Çınar, 2005). In the following years, all these urban interventions became institutionalized through the enforcement of laws and regulations such as Municipality Law (Belediye Kanunu), General Sanitation Law (Umumi Hıfzısıhha) and Construction and Roads Laws (Yapı ve Yollar Kanunu) all over the country (Tekeli, 1999).

2.3 Urban Interventions in Taksim

According to Çınar, through these interventions on the urban space, the new regime was not only constructing its power and authority in front of its constituency, but also representing itself in front of the "global gaze", so as to gain approval and validity at global scale. (Çınar, 2005). Although Ankara was the centre of modernization efforts of the young republic through urbanization and construction works, there was a need for inscribing the symbols of the new republic in Istanbul as well, since Istanbul remained its position as being focal point of the "global gaze" with its historical, cultural and economic prominence (Çınar, 2005).

Nevertheless, Istanbul was full of buildings and monuments representing the Ottoman heritage in its every corner. Sultanahmet Square was the center of the imperial Istanbul, with Hagia-Sophia, Sultanahmet Mosque, and Topkapı Palace in its close vicinity, which are all representatives of the Ottoman power. Therefore, transforming Istanbul's image from the capital of Ottoman empire into a modernist city was not an easy task to accomplish (Çınar, 2005). In order to emphasize its break with this Ottoman

past, the new republic decided to create a new center in the city, Taksim Square, far from the existing historical center and which did not carry any symbols of the Ottoman power and Islamic traditions (Baykal, 2000; Çınar, 2005). The idea was to erect a monument in this new central location, which would symbolize the power and authority of the new regime, and the national identity.

Taksim square constituted an appropriate location for the erection of this monument due to its geographical distance from Sultanahmet Square, the former Ottoman center and its proximity to non-Muslim neighborhoods of the city. Geographically, Taksim square is located on a hilltop on the European side of Istanbul, and on the northern part of historical peninsula, where the Sultanahmet Square lies. Haliç estuary (the Golden Horn) seperates these two land parts from each other. The northern part, Beyoğlu (also called Pera) was mostly populated by non-Muslims during the Ottoman period. Starting from the 16th century, the Grand Rue de Pera (today's Istiklal Street) started to emerge with the establishment of consulates of different Europen countries and the settlement of their officers and wealthy non-Muslim populations of Istanbul around this street (Kuruyazıcı, 1998).

During the 18th century, the settlement enlarged towards the plane which was used as graveyards and where today's Taksim square is located (Polvan & Yönet, 2010). The Maksem building, a water reservoir and one of the most important structures marking the square, was constructed in 1732 in order to distribute water to the neighborhoods in the close vicinity. This area started to be named as Taksim (which means division in Arabic) after the construction of this building (Kuruyazıcı, 1998). Another prominent building, Taksim Artillary Barracks was built in 1780, on the north of reservoir building; and other military buildings, Mecidiye Barracks, and Military Band Barracks, started to surround Taksim square during the 19th century.

19th century was a period when the Ottoman Empire underwent reform movements in its

institutional system and this was also reflected on the urban pattern of the capital city, Istanbul (Baykal, 2000). Pera, with a concentration of non-Muslim population was a model for the urban renovation projects. Therefore, it developed with a more modern face and with western living style. The barracks buildings were also representative of the modernization efforts of the military system. Therefore, Pera was symbolizing modenization attempts of the empire.

2.4 Taksim Square as the National Symbol of the Republic

One of the most important steps transforming Taksim area into a national space was construction of a monument at its center. The Taksim Republic Monument, designed by the Italian sculptor Pietro Canonica, was erected in 1928. The base and the landscaping of the monument were designed by a Levanten architect, Guilio Mongeri. The monument depicts Atatürk and his close surrounding during the Turkish War of Independence on the one side, and after the establishment of republic on the other side. With these figures, it was signifying both the victory of National independence war and the foundation of the republic, which marks a break with the Ottoman past (Kuruyazıcı, 1998). After its establishment, the monument has been a central figure for official celebrations of the republican government, such as victory days and anniversaries.

An overall planning idea for Istanbul first emerged during the 1930s. In 1936 the French planner Henri Prost was invited by the municipality, and Prost was commisioned to prepare a master plan for the city of Istanbul. Between the years 1936-1951, Prost was in charge of planning the city (Bilsel, 2007). In 1939, after the approval of Henri Prost's plan for Istanbul, the Artillary Barracks building was demolished. Instead, a huge park (Gezi Park) "[a] classic-modernist and axial Taksim Esplanade ... propos[ing] a disciplined urbanism overlapping with the ideology of the era with its

surrounding buildings and ceremonialism" replaced the barracks (Yücel & Hatipoğlu, 2008; 319). As a result, the square lost one of the most important elements that formed its border. In addition to that, parallel to the increase in number of streets opening to it, the square started to loose its function as a square and started to look more like a crossroad (Yücel & Hatipoğlu, 2008)

Another important building contributing to the republican imagination and construction of the space is the Atatürk Cultural Center. After its first opening in 1969 with the name Istanbul Culture Palace, it was destructed by a fire, and reopened in 1978 with the name Atatürk Cultural Center (Yücel & Hatipoğlu, 2008). This center also attributes an ideological significance to the square, with the western culture that it represents.

The building's current situation reflects the results of year's long discussions regarding whether the building should be demolished or renovated. In 2005, the Ministry of Culture proposed to demolish the building and rebuild another one, claiming that the existing building cannot meet the growing needs and requires renovation. The idea of demolition brought about reactions, and as a result building was not demolished. In 2008 it was closed for renovation, and the son of the architect of the original building was commissioned to prepare a renovation project for the building. However, this project was opposed by the Culture, Arts and Tourism Worker's Union, and it was cancelled. In 2009, a new project was prepared by the same office according revisions and the renovation works started in 2012. The opening was planned for the year 2013; however in that year the renovation works have ceased (Girit, 2015; Tabanlıoğlu, 2013). As of March 2017, the building still lies in a derelict condition, and the discussions about its fate still continue.

3. TAKSIM SQUARE AS THE PLACE OF REPRESENTATION / CONTESTATION

All these interventions on the urban space, the establishment of Republican Monument, demolishing of Artillary Barracks and building of a public promenade over its location, and construction of Atatürk Cultural Center, marked the establishment of the square as a national public space, spatializing the idea of Turkish nationalism, which also determined the boundaries of the public sphere of the early republican period. As much as it has been a place for official ceremonies of the state, the square has also been a place of contestation, due to high public visibility that it provides for any political activity. This national establishment of the public sphere, and its definition of the urban space, had also affected the daily life and face to face interactions at this specific urban location.

3.1 Taksim Square Massacre on International Worker's Day

The most grievous occasion which Taksim Square had witnessed took place on the celebrations of May 1 in the year 1977. In the protests of workers and leftist groups 33 people were killed. Five of them were killed by fire opened from surrounding buildings. As the panicked protesters were trying to escape from the area, panzers headed towards the crowd and another 28 people died under the panzers. The case has not been solved yet, since the people in charge of these attacks have not been determined. However, many leftist organizations claimed that illegal armed forces, which had developed against leftist organizations within NATO countries and which were in preparation to the military coup d'état in 1980 in Turkey, were in charge of these assaults (Baykan & Hatuka, 2010).

After that incident, Taksim became a symbol of struggle for leftist groups and union organizations, and for a period of more than 30 years, they have fought to gain control over this square against security forces, which try to prevent the celebrations of May 1 by using gas

bombs, batons and probations. Finally, in 2010, 33 years after the Taksim Square Massacre, the governor of Istanbul allowed May 1 celebrations to take place in Taksim square (Baykan & Hatuka, 2010). In 2013, the square was once more closed to May 1 celebrations due to on-going construction work of Taksim Pedestrianization Project (Bianet, 2013), and from that year on the square is still close to May 1.

3.2 Eternal Intentness for Building a Mosque in Taksim

The Muslim conservatives, who were excluded by secular policies of the Republican government, constitute another group which gives power struggle for Taksim Square. In their point of view, Istanbul is a lost city destroyed by the modernization and westernization attempts of the secular state. For almost half a century, this group has carried the desire of building a mosque in the middle of Taksim square, but they were averted by the government or secular groups each time they attempted to build a mosque (Büyüksaraç, 2005; Şimşek, Polvan, & Yeşilşerit, 2006). This on-going controversy came to an end by the decision of administrative court in 2015, which opens the way for construction of a mosque in Taksim Square. In January 2017, the mosque project which proposes a worship space for around 1000 people, including car parks, conference and exhibition halls in the empty area just behind the Maksem building has been approved by the Istanbul number 2 District Council of Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Gökçe, 2017). The construction work has started on 17 February 2017 with an official ceremony with the participation of mayors of Istanbul Greater Municipality and Beyoğlu Municipality (Bozkurt, 2017).

3.3 Taksim Square Pedestrianization Project and the Gezi Protests

Since November 2012 there has been a frantic construction work in Taksim square as a part of the "pedestrianization project" of the square,

which includes pedestrianization of the square through directing the traffic towards under the square with huge tunnels, removing bus stops from the square and reconstructing Artillary Barracks building as a shopping mall and hotel by demolishing Gezi Park.

This project has raised a respectable amount of public debate, and even facilitated the establishment of an activist group named Solidarity for Taksim composed of civil society organizations, professional chambers and political organizations and also including a number of individual academics, architects, urban planners, students, activists, artists, journalists and writers. These individuals and groups objected the project due to its top-down application process, underlining the inappropriateness of the car underpasses; difficulties of reaching the square for pedestrians; the loss of the identity of the square and collective memory of the city. Last but not least, destruction of Gezi Park, one of the few remaining green areas of Taksim and rebuilding the Artillery Barracks building for commercial purposes constituted an important concern (Mimarist). Despite all these critics, the project has been approved by Istanbul Greater Municipality and the pedestrianization of the square is on its way towards completion (İstanbul Greater Municipality).

In addition to pedestrianization of the square, demolition of Gezi Park and reconstruction of Artillary Barracks building with new functions was a part of the project. During the construction works, there were protests and demonstrations against the project, especially focusing on protection of Gezi Park from demolition. On 27th of May 2013, the bulldozers started demolishing the trees in the park. Around 50 activists including architects, planners and artists gathered to stop this demolition and they camped in the park, however, next morning they were evacuated by police forces, their tents were torn down and burnt by the police (Mimarist). In the following few days, police attacks by tear gas and water cannons

continued. Especially with the heavy-handed police attacks on the dawns of 30th and 31st of May 2013, the protests had spread to all over Turkey, including millions of protestors marching on the streets (Atam, 2013).

As the police attacks continued, the protestors started to develop tactics to overcome those attacks. As a result of brutal violence during the last few days of May, and 1st of June, there were millions on Taksim Square, and the police was retreated from the park and the square. Protestors, including people from different backgrounds, political groups, workers' unions, civil society organizations, football team members or people who are not attached to any political ideology or group, started to establish barricades on the streets opening to Taksim and Gezi Park area using pavement stones, police shields, trash cans, burned police buses, or any available material they could find, in order to prevent police cars entering the Gezi Park and Taksim Square area. Meanwhile, Gezi park started to turn into a big commune with tents, an infirmary, food and medicine supply zone, an open library, a children's area. Everything was free in this area, and everybody was working voluntarily for others. All materials like food, medicine, books, were supplied from supporters in Istanbul, and all over the world through internet. Many activities were organized in Gezi during those days, such as meetings, yoga classes, dervish swirling, workshops with children, reading corners and piano recitals. This was a temporary autonomous zone, which was short lived physically, but still enduring mentally (Bulut, 2013; Postvirtual, 2013).

Such kind of big scale urban interventions not only change the physical appearance and functioning of the places in which they are being applied. They also inscribe new meanings to the urban space, through modifying the existing uses, social relations, and memories attached to the place. Any kind of intervention in Taksim square carries a specific meaning due to the political, historical and social significance of the square. It has been a place of representation, struggle, contestation and spectacle throughout its history, especially since the beginning of Turkish republic. It has served as a place for constructing the national identity; establishing a spectacle for the global gaze; claiming unheard and unfulfilled demands and contesting over new forms of identities and representations. Those political actions and claims have found their spatial reflections on the square, creating a vibrant image of the square changing from a global spectacle to a national stage of ideology and power, from an urban transportation node to a place for becoming political (Akpınar & Gümüş, 2012; Baykan & Hatuka, 2010; Büyüksaraç, 2005; Yücel & Hatipoğlu, 2008).

4. CONCLUSION

Those examples illustrate that on the one side, the city, with its public spaces, is a crucial site for seeing others and being seen by others, meeting with new perspectives, voicing claims or objections and becoming political. Therefore they are sites through which public sphere, as the media, institutions, or mind sets of other people, can be accessed, and manipulated. This struggle is not only about a claim to represent different identities but a claim to existence by representation and redefinition of those identities.

On the other side, the city can also become a place of exclusion and segregation with hegemonic and normative strategies that shape the physical space. However, those exclusionary practices are disrupted through several tactics and manoeuvres of daily life practices. Public sphere and public space are being challenged, contested, re-imagined, de-constructed and re-constructed over and over again. These activities collectively construct and reveal an alternative logic of public life. Multiple counter publics, as suggested by Nancy Fraser suggests already exist at different scales (Fraser, 1990).

A new language is needed to create a common ground that allows new modes of communication and openness to other's

perspectives, so that those multiple public spheres may continue to co-exist. Therefore, the idea of public sphere should not be limited with national, international, global or urban scales, but the creative opportunities of other scales such as personal spheres, inter-personal spheres, local spheres, neighborhood spheres need to be underlined in formulating new logics of public life. So here, the main question is, what could spatial disciplines suggest for the cultivation of such a language and common ground for communication?

Acknowledgment

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