

## Chapter nine: Speaking back

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Alev once told me about a meeting with Nilgün Kıvırcık, the *GAP İnşaat* executive responsible for the project and relations with local residents on the developer's side. Kıvırcık was often present at negotiation talks. At her most recent meeting, Alev then told me, there had been an elderly man in the room with her, a resident she did not know but someone who had also been in negotiation talks with GAP İnşaat over his property. During his conversation with the executive, he addressed her as “my daughter” [*kızım*], a common, rather familiar appellation used by elderly people when addressing a younger person. Kıvırcık, sensing a lack of respect – or at least a lack of the professional distance her position during the rather unpleasant negotiation required – reacted angrily, reprimanded the man that she “was not his daughter” and harshly demanded that he address her with the more formal “Nilgün Hanım” in the future.<sup>1</sup> Alev remembered how shocked she was by the female professional's behaviour toward an elderly man, and she told Kıvırcık that it was inappropriate, after which the executive lost her temper.

[Kıvırcık] told me: ‘You talk a lot. You’ll finally be able to live among human beings [when you leave Tarlaabaşı]. You’ve been raised amongst animals. You’ve been raised in a place where animals roam around all day. You should go and live amongst human beings for a change.’ I became angry when she said this and I asked her what she meant by this, if she had meant to insult me. That it sounded like she wanted to call me an animal. I said that if she had, I might take her to court for that. She apologised. I said that I have seen sheep walk around Etiler as well during the Sacrifice Holidays [*Kurban Bayramı*] and asked her why she insisted that [Tarlaabaşı] was a place for animals and Etiler wasn’t. We fought like that for a while.

In retaliation for the perceived slight of criticising her in front of other Tarlaabaşı residents, Nilgün Kıvırcık targeted Alev's self-worth. Similar to the sanitary reformers of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain who described the topography of the city along lines that divided

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1 The more familiar address also implies social norms that Nilgün Kıvırcık had no interest in recognising for the negotiation talks. The formal, more distant relationship gives her the opportunity to disregard social norms that would otherwise shame her for treating an elderly man badly/depriving him of his home.

the “respectable” quarters from the “depraved” slums, the poor neighbourhoods characterised by filth and a population that was indistinguishable from animals, the executive framed Tarlaşaşı as dirty and disgusting, a place “where animals roam around”. In the bourgeois imagination, “the poor are pigs” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 131). Kıvırcık did not mention a specific animal, using the word “*hayvan*”, which can be read as “beast”. Alev, in her reply, rejected this metonymic association between the poor of Tarlaşaşı and animals, and instead chose to understand this grave insult literally: Tarlaşaşı as a place where animals, like rams and sheep, can sometimes be seen on the street.<sup>2</sup> She underlined this by comparing her neighbourhood to the upscale Istanbul quarter of Etiler, a place that Alev associated with the white-collar, middle class lifestyle that Nilgün Kıvırcık represented. In the run-up to the Sacrifice Holidays [*Kurban Bayramı*], she said, animals could be found anywhere in the city, signalling that the rich residents in Etiler were really no different from her poor neighbours in Tarlaşaşı. Alev’s “interpretation” was not only a rejection of a negative stereotype about poverty, but also a clever way to use the executive’s insistence on a formal, legal framework of the interaction to her advantage: she asked if Kıvırcık had meant to call her and other Tarlaşaşı residents animals – the metonymic association that is clearly implied here – and if so, that this would be an insult Alev was willing to take to court for defamation.

Poverty does not only imply the lack of certain material possessions or money. Scholars differentiate between absolute and relative poverty. The former usually refers to a lack of basic human needs such as food, housing, health care, education, and clothing, whereas the latter is based on economic inequality in a society and related to an unequal distribution of resources and power (Akfirat et al. 2016). Research has shown that relative poverty does not only bring material deprivation and economic insecurity. It also has severe socio-psychological consequences, such as reduced self-esteem as well as feelings of humiliation and disrespect (Jones and Novak 1999; Lister 2004; Erdoğan 2007; Tomlinson et al. 2008; Yongmie 2013; Akfirat et al. 2016). In his study of poor people’s self-perception in a Turkish context, Necmi Erdoğan (2007: 66) underlines the central role that symbolic and emotional violence, through the constant assault on the self-respect of the poor, play in their everyday lives. Most of the people that he and his colleagues interviewed found these aspects of poverty more difficult to deal with than increasing material deprivation and social inequality, making the defence and preservation of self-respect the “main pre-occupation” of the urban poor in Turkey.

Alev underlined that this unpleasant conversation with Kıvırcık had been the final straw for her. She would not talk to GAP *İnşaat* representatives again, not about the prospective sale of the flat or any other topic pertaining to the renewal project. She also forbade her mother, who was the legal owner and whose name was written on the family’s title deed, to interact with Nilgün Kıvırcık in any way, fearing that the elderly woman who barely spoke any Turkish would not be able to “handle” the conversation without being insulted. Alev expressed her contempt for project stakeholders by turning

2 There was indeed a shepherd in Tarlaşaşı whom I sometimes spotted from the window of my apartment, and whose presence was revealed through sheep droppings along certain routes. However, I never met him in the street or spoke to him. Just prior to the Sacrifice Holiday, some people would keep rams on their balconies or terraces.

the assault on worth around and stating that it was them who were “just not worth it”. Speaking back to the *GAP İnşaat* executive was a form of breaking through the stigmatising frame that posited Tarlabası residents as invisible, as having no voice, and having entirely accepted and internalised the negative narrative about their neighbourhood and themselves. Imogen Tyler and Tom Slater (2018: 725) point out that “stigmatisation arises in contexts that are shaped by unequal relations of power, and [...] stigma and anti-stigma initiatives are the site of intense social struggles”. There is ample evidence that project stakeholders used their power and their discursive privilege to frame residents of the neighbourhood as immoral, as lumpenproletariat and as criminal as part of their deliberate stigmatisation strategies (Paton 2018), and to erase them from the present and the future of Tarlabası.

*“Those that call Tarlabası residents ‘terrorists’ should be ashamed.”*



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

This chapter examines different ways in which Tarlabası residents tried to push back against this effort to invisibilise them. In the following pages, I explore what “speaking back” looked like under the circumstances in Tarlabası, and how such “backtalk” not only gave voice and form to residents’ humiliations, their anger, and their attempt to circulate a counternarrative to the stigmatising discourse that targeted their neighbourhood and themselves, but also opened cracks in the façade of project stakeholders’ pretence that the stigma was the “objective”, “natural” state of Tarlabası, and not a fabricated lens that necessitated enormous amounts of work to build, maintain, and renew. To do that, I open the chapter with a thick ethnographic description of a failed eviction, and of how the problematic position of one single municipal official lifted the curtain of seamless stigmatisation and allowed a glimpse behind it. Then I go on to describe the symbolic and discursive struggles that some residents engaged in to reframe the story about them-

selves and their neighbourhood. And finally, the chapter lists various messages that residents, unheard and ignored by project stakeholders, nevertheless attempted to deliver to them during evictions.

## Dissonance

On a hot afternoon in July 2011, a small delegation of two lawyers and several municipal officials as well as two uniformed policemen turned up in Tavla Street to evict Kemal, his mentally ill son and his daughter-in-law from their small rental house. Kemal was almost 60 years old at the time. The arrival of the municipal delegation and the looming threat of Kemal's eviction immediately caused a small commotion on his street. The two uniformed policemen parked their car away from Kemal's front door, got out and each lit a cigarette. They appeared otherwise uninterested in what was happening. They had arrived with a lawyer, a bald man holding a briefcase who turned out to be a municipal official, and another woman. The lawyer, a young woman in casual business clothes, approached Kemal and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he and his family would have to vacate the building right away. A few neighbours had started to gather around the scene, but nobody commented or interfered. Kemal did not let himself be intimidated and told the lawyer matter-of-factly that he was unable to leave because he simply had nowhere else to go. If she really was to evict him that day, he explained, he and his son's family would have to sleep in the street. The young woman, who explained that she had come at the behest of the developer *GAP İnşaat*, was unmoved and dismissively told Kemal that he was not the only one in the neighbourhood who "had this problem" and that he should not expect her delegation to help him out in any way. Kemal, unfazed by her rude demeanour, told her that he had recently turned down a 500 TL charity offer by the municipality because that money would not be enough to rent an apartment elsewhere, and that he would need at least three months' rent in advance in order to be able to leave his current house and pay a deposit elsewhere. The lawyer scoffed that he should expect neither the municipality nor the developing company to help him out: "Do you suppose that we will pay from our own pockets or what?" She impatiently reminded her colleagues and the lone municipality official that more evictions were planned for the same afternoon and that there was no time or reason for any further delay. She further accused Kemal of having long overstayed his assigned leaving date, which, in her words, made him a "squatter". Therefore, she barked at him, he did not have the right to protest his eviction.

The municipal official on the other hand, a man of approximately Kemal's age, seemed inclined to enter into discussion with him. He offered to give him "fifty, maybe one hundred Lira as a mercy", but said that he could not possibly hand him the minimum of 1,500 TL Kemal had said he needed to be able to find another home. Again, Kemal protested that he would not be able to do anything with 100 TL, that it was simply not enough to avoid homelessness. At that point the official theatrically turned to the group of neighbours who had gathered around the stoop to watch the altercation between Kemal and the eviction delegation. Raising his voice, and with a sweeping gesture over the small crowd, he said that there were "so many people present", and might they not

be able to help Kemal out? This rather disingenuous suggestion was met with stunned silence. Falsely interpreting this silence as a lack of objection, the official continued:

The municipality has no obligation [to help]. But this citizen is in pain, he is in trouble...anyone with a shred of humanity in them would be sad about that. Right? If I had the means, I swear I would give him [1,500 TL] from my own pocket. If I just had the means! But I don't have the means, I am a lowly government official, I work, I make one and a half [thousand TL] a month. I have kids and stuff...but small alms, a little bit of help...you for example, you live in this neighbourhood...you could [help] this citizen.

At this point Kemal, troubled that the official seemed to insinuate that his neighbours were to blame for his destitution, tried to interject by saying that the people in his neighbourhood *were* helping him, but the municipal official, now on a roll, was having none of it:

Sssh. You don't understand, that's different. In the coffeehouse, if each of your friends gives 50 Lira each, and you can collect that, and if [the municipality] gives you five hundred, then look, you'll get the 1,500 you need. If everyone would pitch in like that...it wouldn't hurt anyone.

His attempt to put the onus on other poor residents of Tarlabası was not immediately picked up by the crowd. Instead, the gathered neighbours replied by asking the official if the eviction could not be delayed by another week, or maybe two, so that Kemal would have a chance to find another house. The official volleyed their question back at them, and again tried to implicitly shame them for not helping out Kemal themselves.

If I had the authority to delay the eviction, I would. Why would I want to hurt a disabled person like that? Do you think I am that cruel? Am I not human? Come on! Now there are so many people here who want to help this person. You all want to help your friend, right? [*He dramatically puts his briefcase on the stairs and gets up, clearly about to make a speech that turns the outrage back at them.*] So, let's see it, why don't you all give him fifty, or one hundred Lira from your pockets? [*He demonstratively puts his hand in his pocket without pulling anything out.*] I'll go first.

However, his thinly veiled attempt to deflect the responsibility for Kemal onto the neighbours gathered in the street fell flat. While most of them only grumbled at his suggestion, one young man got angry, and retorted in a voice dripping with sarcasm: "*Ağbi*, what a great idea! What a wonderful idea! [*He turns around to other neighbours.*] Who has fifty Lira here?" His biting comment was greeted with angry derision from other bystanders, and another man, someone I only knew as a minor drug dealer who had set up a small guerrilla garden on the corner of Kemal's street, started to shout at the municipal official who was now nervously attempting to calm the crowd. The drug dealer yelled at him:

As if anyone here has the means to help Kemal *Ağbi*! You come from the municipality! It is your fault that he is being put out on the street! You want to throw him out today, you have the power to do that, so surely you can stop it, too! If anyone here had this kind of money, we would not be in this situation, would we?

The *muhtar* and some others held him back while he angrily raised and shook his fist at the official who had gotten increasingly anxious and stepped down from his entrance stair podium. The drug dealer continued to express his dismay about the way the project stakeholders treated local residents, but was finally led away by the *muhtar*, a young Kurdish man popular in his district, while the rest of the crowd looked on.

As soon as both men were out of earshot, the official tried to rally everyone's sympathy again. With theatrical gestures, he stressed his own weak position as a lowly municipal employee who maybe represented the authority of the state but who was in fact only a cog in the wheel of government and did not have the power to change the course of events and halt Kemal's eviction. However, the scene ended with the delegation leaving after all, and the eviction postponed for another week. Some of Kemal's neighbours went to congratulate him for "standing up" to GAP İnşaat and the municipality, and for a while, grumbling discontent and outrage was exchanged in conversations on the street before people dispersed again.

However, it had been the guerrilla-gardening dealer who pushed back at the seemingly innocuous attempt by the official to "ease" Kemal's hardship. As one of the only people there, he had shown his anger publicly and embarrassed the municipal official in front of everyone, drawing attention to the hypocrisy of his request. Just as the aforementioned GAP İnşaat executive had done by insisting on being called "*Hanım*", instead of the more familiar "*kızım*", the municipal official charged with Kemal's eviction was appealing to a certain social code of appropriateness by asking the gathered neighbours to help out Kemal. At the same time, and just as Nilgün Hanım had done, he violated this code by acting inappropriately, since he was himself the agent of the institution that set out to destroy this kind of social contract of appropriateness for the entire neighbourhood. Part of the state-led stigmatisation was the allegation that Tarlabası was an empty, forgotten place without any sense of community, and that this "fact" had nothing to do with the municipality or national urban policies. However, chapter six described the basic accommodations of a social contract that residents in Tarlabası had access to, and that included support networks and the importance of solidarity and mutual care between neighbours. The scene between Kemal, the official, and the guerrilla gardener laid bare the deep dissonance between the way the neighbourhood was framed by the municipality, and the municipal representative's publicly displayed knowledge that this frame in no way corresponded to the reality on the ground. His implicit accusation of Kemal's neighbours showed exactly that: he (wrongly) blamed them for being disrespectful and in violation of the social contract he clearly knew existed in a neighbourhood like Tarlabası. The social contract, the solidarity ties in the neighbourhood that the state-led stigmatising discourse erased, were real. The official's appeal to that contract proves that he, too, knew that it was real.

The solution the official suggested was highly hypocritical. Charged with the oversight of evictions in the street, he knew that most of the people gathered there were facing problems similar to Kemal's. The official also knew that despite their poverty and their destitution, they had been helping Kemal, because that is what Kemal explicitly told him. He on the other hand *represented* the state authority who was just about to evict a handicapped man, his handicapped son and that son's wife. He was the problem he appealed

to the solidarity network in the neighbourhood to solve. The drug dealer's public display of anger was the pushback that made this contradiction visible for everyone at the scene.

The marginalisation and discrimination of Tarlabası residents during the negotiation stage of the renewal project and in the run-up to evictions was to a large part based on the neighbourhood stigma, that both created and justified the victimisation of those deemed unworthy of justice and respect. A lot of the work of the municipality, of the project lawyers, of the development company representatives, and of the entire neoliberal state apparatus and its agents was only possible by pretending that this stigma was not, to a very large part, the result of the power and discursive privilege of these actors, powerful people and institutions that were able to shape the narrative about Tarlabası and its residents. The municipal official's reaction, his appeal to the very social contract that the agents of his and other state institutions denied, lifted the curtain, and afforded onlookers a glimpse of the machine that churned out the stigma of that the municipality pretended it did not exist.

## Symbolic struggles

Considerable marketing efforts initially went into the attempt to sell the demolitions as progress that would benefit everyone. However, few Tarlabası residents believed the glossy advertisements over their own experiences with state agents, with the knowledge about state corruption and their view of the rich and powerful as self-serving, greedy, and dismissive of the urban poor. When Müge and Gülay looked through the project's marketing catalogue together, they were under no illusions who the target audience of the renewal project really was:

Look at this. All these rich people. These streets. Look at this guy with his nice briefcase. What does this have to do with Tarlabası, or with us? These expensive cars, the shopping bags, the cafés they want to build, there will be no room for us. This is all for rich people. They are lying when they say that the new Tarlabası is for us. They want us to leave, they want us to disappear.

Kurdish second-hand furniture seller Maher reacted similarly when he was leafing through the catalogue, calling project stakeholders out on their discrimination against Tarlabası residents, even when they attempted to dress the project up as benevolent. He pointed out that none of the people or the objects in the catalogue represented current Tarlabası residents:

Nobody in Tarlabası looks like that. Where are the women wearing headscarves? Where are the Kurds? No kid in Tarlabası has nice toys like that. Who here has the money to buy such a [tricycle]? Where is the laundry? They make it look like our Tarlabası is bad, and as if only rich people deserve to be here. They are not better than us. It's shameful [*ayıp*].

Just like Gülay and Müge, Maher was offended by the aggressive "Before/After" imagery that the municipality was using. He rejected the suggestion that the Tarlabası he recognised, where most people were poor, where many of his neighbours were Kurdish like



himself, where laundry lines crisscrossed the streets, and where women were dressed in traditional long skirts and headscarves, were in some way “worse” than the polished, gentrified version of the neighbourhood that the project promoted. On the contrary, he shamed the municipality for this insinuation. Tarlabası residents regularly underlined the strong neighbourhood ties in the *mahalle* as more important than material wealth. Özgür, Alev’s fiancé, said that the marketing speak in the promotional material was merely a thinly veiled attempt to hide the immoral financial gain and the planned socio-demographic engineering.

So, they’ll demolish this neighbourhood. [...] They are kicking people out of their homes overnight. Why? Because there is money to be made. So that rich people can come and live here. [...] What are we then? Are we not human?

Özgür called the developers greedy and only interested in profit. This ties in with the widespread image that many poor in Turkey have of the rich (Erdoğan 2007). Cemile often underlined that she did not wish for material wealth, since she thought that rich people lacked human qualities that she considered more important.

How about that! So we are not allowed to live here. Why shouldn’t I live here? What are we then? You are rich, but you’re just as human as me, no matter if I am poor. Maybe my poverty is better even than your wealth! There is more goodwill...our table is full, we are rich that way, but most importantly we are rich in goodwill. Wealth has no use. If I have ten Lira today, I’m a rich person. [...] *Vallah*, I really don’t want any wealth. I say *Allah*, if you want to change me, don’t make me rich. If I stay as I am, it’s better. When I find five Lira, two Lira, that makes me so happy, I buy bread for one Lira and cheese for one Lira, there you go, that’s our dinner.

In his study of self-perceptions of the urban poor in Turkey, Erdoğan (2007: 48–49) underlines that the many “discriminating, degrading and hurtful” descriptions of class difference show that, despite a lack of thorough analysis of social hierarchies, the relationship between “the rich” and “the poor” rests on mutual enmity. In the narratives of the poor that he and his colleagues interview, the wealthy are described as “arrogant”, “greedy”, “spoilt”, “tightfisted”, “cruel”, “immoral”, or “dishonest”, to name but a few, whereas the poor are depicted as “helpful”, “cooperative”, “morally above the rich”, “pure”, “sympathetic”, or “generous” (ibid.: 49).

Erdoğan underlines that it is not wealth per se that is seen as offensive, but the patterns of behaviour that wealth produces, as well as the lifestyle of the wealthy and the way money is spent. This finds its echo in countless Turkish movies where the bourgeois/middle class is portrayed as degenerate, cruel and manipulative as opposed to the pure, morally upstanding poor (ibid.: 50). While the poor generally differentiate between the “good rich” and “the bad rich”, the general image they have of the wealthy is a negative one.

This is something I came across in Tarlabası as well. I heard anecdotes and stories that aimed to illustrate how frivolous, unhelpful, and stingy wealthy people were, often in relation to food and shelter. Hospitality, I was told, was freely offered in Tarlabası, but I would never find it in richer Istanbul neighbourhoods. Sometimes these stories centred on anonymous actors, and sometimes they were stories about rich relatives who behaved



badly. Following an unpleasant encounter with Nilgün Kivırcık, during which Cemile felt she had been treated with particular disdain and disrespect by the younger woman, and had finally been thrown out of Kivırcık's office, Cemile told me a story about an invitation to distant, wealthy relatives in order to explain to me why the wealthy – a class to which Kivırcık belonged in her eyes – not only lacked manners, but were in fact ridiculous, too:

I don't like rich people's places [*sosyete yer*]. Once we went [to visit relatives] and there was a small child, and they were so worried the whole time. 'Oh, the ashtray was so expensive, be careful, it'll break', it was 'be careful with this' and 'be careful with that'...I don't like to visit them unless I have to. [...] And you know what, you always stay hungry in the homes of the rich. *Vallahi*, you stay hungry. Once we went, they invited us to eat. We were 15 people. So we sat there and waited, I couldn't ask them for anything because I was ashamed to. But then I was so hungry that I started to get dizzy, so I asked them for a piece of bread. [The host] said: 'Oh no, what do you want with dry bread, we'll eat food!' He said 'food', but what can I tell you, it was a tiny pot filled with a little bit of meat! [*Shows how little with her hands.*] Such a small pot. So that was the meat from the sacrificial animal, right? They said they cooked the meat, and then he lifted the lid off the pot, and there was so little in it! I thought that I'd fill my stomach with bread...but there was one loaf of bread for 15 people! [...] They told me not to eat bread because there was food, and how could I have said anything about how little meat there was in the pot? [*Laughs*] I didn't say anything. There was one loaf of bread, *vallahi*! They put out the bread, and a tiny bit of rice, a small dish of peas. There were 15 people! The kids had one spoonful of rice, a spoonful of peas. [...] Then we went home, can you imagine how fast we went? [*Laughs*] Bread! Eggs! I said, get out all the food, let's eat until we are full! I don't like going to these chic homes. You'll stay hungry in rich peoples' houses. That's how the rich are.

Cemile told me this story about rich people violating one of the most basic social norms in Turkey, generous hospitality, with considerable glee. While it did not directly target Nilgün Kivırcık, it was a way to re-establish self-worth in the face of the condescension of the wealthier woman who had clearly positioned herself as belonging to a higher class than Cemile. James Scott (1985: 197) writes that in the symbolic struggle between the rich and the poor, "character assault is one of the few remaining social weapons" for the latter. The anecdote that Cemile told me provided her with proof, and the consolation, that the rich might own more things and put on airs, but that they were in fact attached to material objects more than to their own family and comically greedy despite their material wealth. Poor people, on the other hand, could claim generosity and warmth for themselves, and were therefore at least morally superior.

Cemile also explained that she preferred Tarlaşağı to more luxurious, or more "modern" Istanbul neighbourhoods. When she visited her daughter who lived in a residential complex on the outskirts of the Alibeyköy neighbourhood, Cemile said that she often felt sad because of the lack of interaction in the street, the anonymity of big supermarkets she had to go to. She was also unable to "lower a basket"<sup>3</sup> when she wanted to buy a few

3 In many more traditional Istanbul neighbourhoods, shopping-by-basket was a very convenient way of purchasing a small number of items without having to leave the house. One would lower

small items, because that way of shopping did not exist where her daughter lived, a place that, however, was “very modern, with beautiful villas everywhere”.

The symbolic struggle over what qualities characterise a liveable neighbourhood was one way in which residents challenged negative assumptions and stigmatising narratives about Tarlabası. In a similar vein, Halil Usta underlined that his barber shop might lack the design that reflected luxury and a certain type of commercialised modernity, but that he and his associate Necmi Usta offered the intimacy and the congenial atmosphere that more fashionable, and more exclusive barbers in wealthier neighbourhoods, shops that might be labelled “*kuaför*” rather than “*berber*”, did not provide. By highlighting what was good and desirable about his shop as an example for Tarlabası, Halil underlined that different values than just signs of material affluence could be important, contesting that his neighbourhood was without worth (Cairns, 2018).

Erdoğan (2007: 49) writes that the importance of goodness plays a central role in the self-identification of the poor and becomes a “weapon of the weak” that shields them against material deprivation and psychological suffering in the face of the all-pervasive poverty stigma. The struggle for recognition and agency therefore is also a struggle over moral superiority.

It is important to note that in Turkey, poverty is not framed in the same way as in the US, Canada, Australia, or many other Western European countries where aggressive neoliberal agendas and austerity policies have not only led to deepening economic and social inequalities, but where the poor have been increasingly demonised, stigmatised, and misrepresented as workshy scroungers who lack the ambition and will to improve their life circumstances (Macdonald et al. 2013; Jensen 2014; Jensen and Tyler 2015; Wright 2016; Shildrick 2018). This “poverty propaganda” can be so powerful and pervasive that even those who experience inequality and severe material deprivation adhere to this image (Shildrick and Macdonald 2013; Shildrick 2018: 785). Amongst the poorest in Turkey, Erdoğan (2007: 76) argues, the responsibility for poverty and the unjust distribution of resources is frequently laid at the feet of the state and the “selfish” rich. Excessive wealth is seen as suspicious. The difference in status between the rich and the poor is often described as unfair, and those that are rich are suspected of having attained their wealth and status in unfair ways and not “by the sweat of brow”. Put differently, the rich came by their possessions by illicit means, by stealing the belongings of others and by corruption, and therefore do not deserve what they have (Akfirat et al. 2016: 420). The poor in Turkey offset this injustice with the claim that they might be destitute, but that they are at least honest, and that they did not try to climb the social ladder with the help of immoral and illicit means. In short, they express moral agency by stressing the choice of their own self-respect over wealth, and in so doing establish moral superiority over the rich (Erdoğan 2007: 76). In the context of the urban renewal project, residents had ample ammunition to accuse project stakeholders and other powerful actors interested in the

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a basket, or any other sturdy receptacle, like a bucket, from one's window or balcony, call out to either the shop owner or even some passer-by and that person would take the money in the basket and buy the requested items, and put them back in the basket (with the change). This way of shopping required a certain level of trust and familiarity in the neighbourhood and was entirely impossible in the high-rises that now dominate the suburbs of big Turkish cities.

renewal of their neighbourhood of profiteering and immoral enrichment on the backs of the poor populace.

## Gossip

The barbershop of Halil and Necmi was the perfect place to listen to gossip. There I could hang out, watch the barbers at work, and listen to their interactions with their male customers, neighbours or random passers-by. As a foreign woman sitting in the relatively small shop, I was certainly not invisible, and a bit of an oddity to customers who had never met me there before. It was nevertheless a place where I could listen to hours of casual conversations. Many customers enjoyed hearing bits of news and gossip from the neighbourhood while getting a haircut, a shave, or while waiting for their face mask to dry. Political debates happened, but were rarer, and discord amongst supporters of different political camps never amounted to more than friendly teasing and squabbling. However, much of the small talk centred around people everyone involved in these conversations was acquainted with, and amounted to what could be subsumed under gossip, which historian Chris Wickham (1998: 11) defines as “talking about other people behind their backs”. Such chitchat was never malicious, not in my presence at least, with one notable exception: when speaking about the project actors and in particular Beyoğlu mayor Ahmet Misbah Demircan, people did not feel the need to hold back. James Scott (1990: 142) argues that gossip, in his words “the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression”, is “designed to ruin the reputation of some identifiable person or persons”. This is what distinguishes gossip, “a discourse about social rules that have been violated”, from rumour, its close relative (*ibid.*). And while some argue that gossip is most often used as a discursive technique of social control amongst equals, other scholars have shown that gossip, especially in the form of malicious gossip and character assassination, can be a way to attack the reputation of the powerful and help create solidary links amongst a community against more powerful outsiders (Gilmore 1987; Scott 1990). Critics have pointed out that informal and indirect demonstrations of subversion such as gossip, cynicism or humour should be re-evaluated not as acts of resistance, but of compliance, since they are risk-free, ineffective, and ultimately contribute to the continuation of domination (Fleming and Spicer 2003; Contu 2008). However, my objective here is not to argue whether the exchange of gossip in Halil Usta’s shop was a display of resistance or a meek act of compliance. Rather, I would like to show how the neighbourhood badmouthing of one of the main agents of the urban renewal project constituted a subtle shift of the frame. By undermining the credibility and respectability of the stigmatisers, these anecdotes showed that they were unreliable narrators, and that the negative stories they told about Tarlabası were not to be unquestioningly trusted.

The Beyoğlu mayor came up as a topic of barber shop gossip on several occasions and were relayed with gleeful derision. Demircan was variously described as a fop, a mindless dandy [*artist*], as being under the thumb of prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. His outfit, his relatively long hair and demeanour during a televised neighbourhood walk, a talk show, or a press conference were regularly commented and ridiculed.

However, the juiciest piece of gossip about the local politician was that he had allegedly murdered a man as a child and on the behest of his criminal family. Demircan, the narrative went, grew up as a member of a Black Sea family clan that was part of the so-called “land mafia” [*arsa mafyası*] in Istanbul and deeply involved in illegal and illicit activities such as corruption and land theft.<sup>4</sup> This allegation held a kernel of truth. The mayor’s uncle had been the well-known neighbourhood strongman, or *kabadayı*, Sultan Demircan, nicknamed “Grandfather Sultan” [*Dede Sultan*], an illustrious figure of Istanbul history who had allegedly been involved in organised crime.<sup>5</sup> In 1973, he was shot in the head and killed, and the shots had reportedly been fired by his 8-year-old nephew (Hürriyet 1973). The notorious uncle’s relation to the Beyoğlu mayor was freely talked about by the Turkish press and considered common knowledge (Ay 2010). The men in the barber shop told me excitedly that Demircan, as a result of mafia rivalries, had been asked to kill a man and complied. There was no compassion for the supposed boy felon, only mockery and contempt: “And he did! You see, he is in fact a murderer, but he was a kid then, so they couldn’t put him in jail, that’s why he had to do it and not anyone else. In these families, they usually ask kids to do the murder, because they cannot be tried like adults. The stories we could tell you, you have no idea!”

Everyone present in the barber shop agreed with this story, while my ignorance of these “facts” was met with friendly incredulity. “Everybody knows this!” I was told. It was not the only bit of gossip about Demircan. Sometimes the barber shop patrons attacked the disliked mayor’s reputation by citing his father, prominent Islamic scholar Ali Rıza Demircan. He had written a book about sexuality and Islam, and regularly appeared on TV as an expert on the subject. Less ominous than the tale of gruesome murder, the gossip about the conservative man giving sex advice on television was often cause for hilarity. In a way this took aim at the seniority and gravitas of the head of the Demircan family, and by extension the seniority and gravitas of the urban politics advanced by his son.

Scott (1990: 143) writes that gossip, even in the form of character assassination, “is a relatively mild sanction against the powerful” that may never reach the ears of its victims. It is furthermore crucial, even if gossip is nothing but a blunt weapon of resistance, that those who are being targeted must have a certain social standing (ibid.). For an elected politician who wishes to garner support for his ideas and policies from his constituents, a good image is arguably crucial. Not only the Tarlabası project, but also much of the administrative work in Beyoğlu under Demircan was focussed on a new, “cleaner”, and less stigmatised image. By symbolically tarnishing his reputation with these stories, especially before an “audience”, the gossipers in the barber shop were both ridiculing that

4 The “land” or “estate mafia” was the name for criminal groups that illegally controlled and sold land, often publicly owned, in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Farsakoğlu: 1990).

5 Ryan Gingeras, drawing on the work of Roger Deal, writes that *kabadayı* culture stems from the elite Ottoman janissary corps, but that the name and image of the *kabadayı*, a neighbourhood strongman who used violence to keep other strongmen in check and exert control over “his” neighbourhood, was adopted by 20th-century members of organised crime (see Gingeras 2014). To this day there is a certain romanticism associated with the figure of the neighbourhood *kabadayı* as a “noble bandit” and “man of the people”.

goal and questioning the sincerity of it. In so doing they turned the stigmatisation spotlight on those who accused them of not fitting in with social norms and laws.

Despite the conviction with which these pieces of gossip were relayed, I did not have the impression that any of the men *really* thought the Beyoğlu mayor was a killer. Rather, it seemed to me that this was a *dramatization* of a counternarrative meant to throw the mayor's reputation into question – after all, he really did have at least one famously criminal uncle and a dubious family history – an illustration to prove that the mayor's word did not weigh as heavy as one might think, since he was not the respectable politician he purported to be. It was a hint that maybe his view of the neighbourhood was not to be trusted, and that it was him, not Tarlabası or its residents, that stood accused of a criminal past and unseemly behaviour.

### Calling out project stakeholders

Several of the anecdotes in this book have described how residents were misled, misinformed, or lied to by project stakeholders, leading them to take disadvantageous or wrong decisions concerning their property, their legal efforts, or their tactics concerning looming evictions. Previous chapters have established that this disinformation was at least partly strategic, rooted in the territorial stigma surrounding the neighbourhood, and the related erasure of residents and their interests. It is very clear that people in Tarlabası were aware of the dishonesty of local authorities. While it was exceedingly rare that local residents verbally attacked project officials to their faces – though, as this chapter has documented, that *did* happen, too – they certainly voiced their anger “offstage”, behind the backs of powerholders (Scott 1990: 4). For example, Cemile accused the deputy mayor and the “fat lawyer” at the municipal information office of lying to her about planned demolitions. Similarly, Kurdish widow Esma explained that she had been cheated by municipal officials about her legal rights concerning her deceased husband's apartment. Esma said that she had been called into the project office on Tarlabası Boulevard after her husband's first wife had sold the apartment to the municipality in the summer of 2010. There she was asked to sign a document that Esma said she did not read beforehand because the municipal officials sitting across from her promised that nobody in Tarlabası would be victimised and that she therefore did not need to worry. When this turned out to be a lie, and she and her child were violently evicted from their home, Esma shared her frustration with her former neighbours Cemile and Alev:

I didn't read [the documents] because they said that nobody would suffer. They said that they would make everyone [in Tarlabası] a house owner. They said they would give everyone a house. But they did not do anything for us. Nothing! Nobody is doing anything for us. Now they say that we have to see how to sort ourselves out. They lied to us. I trusted them, but they are liars.

Despite the municipality's extensive publicity campaign, Tarlabası residents maintained that the entire project was unlawful, and that the motives of project stakeholders were guided only by profiteering, nepotism, and corruption. Due to the lack of transparency and information, and the suspicion of residents of being cheated, many people felt that

the municipality was throwing sand in people's eyes. Too afraid of voicing their displeasure out loud, of "speaking truth to power" (Scott 1990: 1) for fear of repercussions, such as expropriation, losing out on sales offers, or simply because the thought felt too intimidating, many residents resorted to badmouthing project stakeholders vis-à-vis their friends and neighbours.

Second-hand furniture seller Cemal, during a conversation with some of his shop neighbours in the street, aired his anger toward project stakeholders and the government, accusing them of nepotism and tricking residents out of a fair share of the profits:

[The Tarlaabaşı law] is an unjust law. Because the boss of the company who won the tender here is prime minister Erdoğan's relative. His son-in-law. Çalık Holding or something. They passed a law just for his son-in-law in parliament, for him personally. He passed a law just for himself.[...] I think the municipality is trying to be clever. They say they'll give people from here apartments in Kayabaşı, so that they'll leave [Tarlaabaşı], so that they'll go, because a big profit will be made here. Hill Street is just one street over from here. There they started building luxury boutique hotels. If they build luxury hotels there, that means something will happen here as well.

Many Tarlaabaşı residents wondered how much profit the government, the municipality and the developing company *GAP İnşaat* would make, and by how much (not if) they were being sold short. Property owners wondered if the proposed sales prices were proportionate to the actual value of their real estate. The daily *Radikal* had reported that *GAP İnşaat* foresaw eye-watering profit margins. In one case, a five-storey listed building, expropriated for a mere 761,000 TL, was projected to be sold for around 7.5 million US dollar (Ince 2012). Such news was intensely debated amongst residents, and they cemented the opinion that the renewal project was not about improving the neighbourhood, but about profiteering. In several conversations, in the teahouse, the barber shop, or on the street, I heard people telling each other that the municipality was "nothing but bunch of liars and thieves without any honour". These expressions of anger were confined to the neighbourhood, but they nevertheless showed that residents challenged the smothering claim that they were "content" with the renewal project and had "no objections". No matter how toothless these small speech acts were, shared with neighbours and researchers like me, they were a contestation of the invisibilisation and erasure of residents' voices.

## Putting the blame where it belongs

Of course, some Tarlaabaşı residents at least partly internalised the stigma of their neighbourhood. While some attempted to deflect this taint onto their neighbours, others accepted the negative narrative as fact and directed the blame for the bad reputation against the neighbourhood, including themselves. However, people also called attention to how outside actors contributed to, if not downright caused, the neighbourhood stigmatisation and the victimisation of its inhabitants.

Tarlaabaşı residents often talked about various state officials' misconduct, about the widespread and visible police corruption, about nepotism, the shameless profiteering, the excessive police violence and the seemingly contradictory fact that officers turned a

blind to existing crime. Tarlabası residents, especially trans\* sex workers and Kurdish men, were regularly victims of harassment and mistreatment by law enforcement officers. Alev's fiancé Özgür, a Kurdish man in his early thirties from Mardin Province, was frequently accosted by the police in Tarlabası and adjacent streets, such as the checkpoints on Tarlabası Boulevard. He was often rudely asked for his ID card and the "purpose" of his being in the neighbourhood, on the street at a certain hour, or at all. His experience with regular police checks stood in sharp contrast to the lack of police oversight and intervention when it came to drug dealers, many of whom lingered on street corners and in front of empty buildings, especially at night.

The police? All they do here is take bribes. All the police are good for here is to take bribes. They throw a few rounds of teargas, and they take money. There is not a single honourable/upstanding [namuslu] person in that police station. As long as they get their money they don't care...you know those youngsters hanging out at the corner? They are there day and night, but nobody ever asks for their IDs. If I walk down the street now, [the police] will ask for my ID, or they'll take me to the station, or they'll put me in jail. That's what they do to poor people [*gariban*] like me. They ask me for my ID all the time. [...] But down at the corner there are always four or five young boys, villagers. They sell drugs, they sell marihuana, they steal. People who live here are scared to go past them. But what do you know, [the police] cooperates with them, in the evenings they eat and drink together, they have fun together. But wherever they find a poor person at night, leaving work and going home, they'll grab them and put them in jail because they say: what business do you have here at this hour? They should deal with [the drug dealers] first! The state does not concern itself with rich people, but they can do this to poor people. That's their justice. What can you do? How can you fight back against that?

Distrust in the police was a common issue in Tarlabası (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 190). After the adoption of the 2005 misdemeanour law in 2005, discriminatory "stop and frisk" tactics became very common, and they often targeted Kurdish men and trans\* sex workers (Human Rights Watch 2008a; Human Rights Watch 2008b; Amnesty International 2011b). Due to his own experience of countless unpleasant encounters with the police, Özgür could only make sense of the seemingly carefree existence of drug dealers in the neighbourhood by assuming that the police did not only turn a blind eye, but actually worked together with them. I asked him if he had ever actually seen the joint police-drug dealer "fun" he described, and he said that it was "obvious" to him that it could only be so. One might argue that Özgür was particularly averse to the police (Sahin and Akboga 2019), and that his was a singularly strong opinion based solely on his own negative experience of discrimination. But this was not the case, either. Chapter four in this book has shown that many residents felt that their neighbourhood was both underserved and overpoliced. And once, I witnessed an officer of the Istanbul motorcycle police unit colloquially referred to as "dolphins" [*yunuslar*] take a money bribe from one of the drug dealers that were hanging out around Tree Street. He drove up to him and took a small wad of banknotes out of the dealer's trouser back pocket, quickly counted it, and drove on. It was an early winter evening, and it was already dark outside, but it happened only a few metres down from Halil Usta's brightly lit barber shop and in the sightline of a photographer



(who was holding his camera visibly in his hands) and me. When I told Halil Usta about what I had seen, he was not surprised at all, and said that “everybody in Tarlabası” knew that the police took bribes from local drug dealers, and that it happened all the time. It had been obvious that the police officer had felt safe enough to conduct this transaction right in front of us without worrying about us or the camera.

This overt indifference to, and in the above case, cooperation with drug dealers led people to argue that the police and by extension, the Turkish state, were in large part to blame for the state and the bad reputation of the neighbourhood. Alev’s uncle Mahmut told me:

[Tarlabası] is a very beautiful neighbourhood in every sense. It’s a bit run down, that’s a different matter. And that’s the state’s fault. Gangs and stuff. If they would do something against that...but they act as if any crime is ok to do, as long as it’s not political. They let [criminals] be, they even work together with them. One cannot blame the people who live here. The police are to blame. On the one hand they get a salary from the state, they live in government lodgings, they get cars, they can make use of all kinds of laws, and then they come here and walk around the streets and find ways to make money off these streets as well. Who do you think is to blame? The police of course! [...] We see it with our own eyes! But we can’t complain about this! Who would we complain about this to? Their superiors! And what would the superiors do? Nothing. You can’t change anything. [...] You cannot stand up against them. Unless you have someone very powerful behind you. That’s the only way you can stand up to them.

He made it very clear that in his eyes the fault for the crime and insecurity in Tarlabası lay not with the residents, but with the police who did not do their job. Both non-resident outsiders and Tarlabası residents agreed that crime and disorder were a problem in the neighbourhood. However, whereas project stakeholders turned this bad reputation into a narrative supporting the renewal argument, residents argued that the opposite was true: if the police and the authorities would do their duty and provide safety and security, the neighbourhood could reach its full potential. This was also one of Erdal Aybek’s arguments against the stigmatising narrative of the municipality. The former Tarlabası Association spokesman said:

So yes, ok, there is crime in Tarlabası. There are drug dealers. There are thieves and pickpockets. We all know that, it’s true. That’s what the municipality says. But you know, why would that be the residents’ responsibility? Why are the residents now being punished for the police not doing their job? That Tarlabası is not very safe, that it is not all good, that is the municipality’s and the government’s fault. They do nothing against it.

Even if the accounts of widespread neglect and corruption *were* nothing but rumours, they would still provide a “counter-script to stigmatic representations” (Kirkness and Tijé-Dra 2017: 122). David Samper (2002: 23) writes that rumours “are an alternative means for people to express and gain some ownership over a perceived social problem.” The often-shared anecdotes about police misconduct and violence were one way that residents, who otherwise had no access to shaping the public narrative, participated in the claim-making process. Rumours that contest a hegemonic ideology or narrative

are a discursive tactic that gives people the opportunity to reject, and reframe, self-deprecating views and stigma. Therefore, rumours can encourage “a community to challenge hegemony at the social, everyday level” (ibid.: 20). Sharing these rumours and anecdotes, especially with an outside observer was an expression of agency. Widely shared anecdotes about police corruption and misconduct, as well as about the inability or unwillingness of the police to provide security in the neighbourhood, turned the blame away from residents and onto the authorities, providing the counternarrative that the *real* criminals were in fact the municipality, the authorities, and the private developer who occupied the sales offices on the other side of Tarlabası Boulevard.

The same was true for the dominant narrative that Tarlabası was a dilapidated, half-ruined neighbourhood that urgently required outside intervention and large-scale renewal. As stated in earlier chapters, parts of Beyoğlu, and all of Tarlabası, were declared an urban conservation area by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Board in 1993. This meant that property owners were not allowed to renovate or modify their buildings in any way without official permission. Any infringement could mean a high fine. As a result of that regulation many property owners did not undertake necessary repair work on their buildings. Kurdish second-hand furniture dealer Maher, himself a tenant, argued that it was therefore disingenuous for the municipality and other stakeholders to frame Tarlabası as neglected. He also pointed out that their alleged goodwill was not believable, since the profiteering in most large urban renewal projects in Istanbul was so obvious:

It's all so unjust...all of Istanbul requires renewal, seriously. For example, here, there are buildings that are maybe twenty years old, and down the street there are houses and shops that are more than one hundred years old. But they only demolish in places where they hope to make money. They throw out the people in them. The only places they are interested in are the ones that are profitable, everything else they don't touch, no matter how old or dilapidated. [...] They never kept [this neighbourhood] clean, they have never looked after it. It's in the centre of Istanbul and it looks like a garbage dump, like a village in the middle of nowhere. Everyone should do their own painting, their own repairs. But they never allowed that. Why? So that people would be fed up and leave.

I met residents who had been fined several hundreds of Turkish Lira for painting rusted balcony rails or the repair of a leaky roof. The Tarlabası Association, in their struggle to oppose the renewal project as drawn up by the Beyoğlu Municipality and *GAP İnşaat*, repeatedly asked that homeowners should be given the opportunity to renovate their own property in order to improve the neighbourhood. In fact, during the first ever meeting at the municipality, mayor Demircan had promised to secure microcredits to do just that. For many residents it was thus both deeply cynical and unacceptable to be blamed for the bad physical state of their neighbourhood.

The same was true for the gradual dilapidation of the building stock in the time after the project announcement. With the start of demolitions in August 2010 and the acceleration of evictions and departures, single apartments and entire buildings were left abandoned as tenants began to move out. But this happened in a trickle. Many residents remained in their homes and their shops, either because they or their landlords were still fighting evictions in court, or simply because they had nowhere else to go. The

buildings and apartments that *had* been sold became the responsibility of project stakeholders. However, these buildings were largely neglected. In some cases, this meant that squatters, often very poor Syrian refugees, started to occupy these unsafe spaces. It also meant that scavengers hoping to earn a few coins ripped into these buildings, dismantling wooden, metal, and other recyclable and sellable structures. Wooden beams, stairs, floors and windows made excellent firewood. By mid-2011, foragers were hard at work in all renewal area streets, noisily breaking out everything they thought to be profitable, leaving buildings in danger of collapse.

This intense scavenging left behind rows of semi-ruins that had gaping black holes where windows and doors used to be. Some residents likened the sight to a “warzone”, complaining that this made their neighbourhood “look terrible” to passers-by on the main Tarlabası Boulevard and to passengers of taxis and the *dolmuş* who drove up Tree Street, an important arterial road that connected Dolapdere to Taksim. Many believed that the municipality was allowing this to happen, partly to put pressure on residents and accelerate the eviction process, and partly to bolster the stigmatising discourse they employed to justify renewal. Halil Usta, who at that point still spent almost every day in Tarlabası and who was watching the rapid change in the neighbourhood, was worried about safety and the image that a semi-ruined neighbourhood projected to outsiders, and the effect this negative image would have on solidarity with Tarlabası residents.

Look at this, it looks so bad. The municipality owns these buildings now, they should make sure that people don't scavenge and that it is safe for us. Children play on the streets. People are walking past these buildings. What if something falls down? It looks like a warzone here. The municipality does this to make Tarlabası look worse. Because of the project. Anyone who walks past will think: what kind of bad place is this? Everyone already thinks that Tarlabası is a bad place. They will say that it is good that they will demolish it.

At least one building did collapse as a result of the removal of the heavy metal beams and wooden structures that had stabilised it. The small three-storey house simply caved in one afternoon, only a few months after its former occupant had been evicted. Luckily nobody was hurt, but children did play on the street all the time. Many blamed the municipality for not taking care of the buildings they had bought. Project stakeholders did employ a welder who sealed apartments that were empty, but they did not pay much attention as to what happened after the welder had left.

Rumours of deliberately infrequent garbage collection in Tarlabası that had started as early as 2008 resurfaced during the time of my fieldwork. The situation had deteriorated by then. In streets where the majority of buildings lay abandoned, garbage was not collected at all anymore. Bags of refuse were piling up inside empty buildings and on the streets, and during the summer months this growing heap of debris led to an increase in vermin and a horrific stench that beleaguered those who still lived in the vicinity or who had to pass through. As garbage disposal was the responsibility of the municipality, residents interpreted the authorities' failure to clean the streets as yet another form of weaponised indifference designed to punish residents unwilling or unable to leave, and to literally turn Tarlabası into the “garbage dump” it had been described as by project

stakeholders and the mainstream media. Alev, whose family left late in 2011 when many buildings were already abandoned, put the blame squarely onto the municipality.

What is this? It's disgusting. People throw their trash into the streets, and the municipality just leaves it there. They do that on purpose. It's the municipality's responsibility to send garbage trucks. We tell them but they don't. What can we do? Is this our fault? We live here, we have to walk on these streets every day. There are rats, there are microbes, the children will get sick. They want Tarlabası to look like this, but it's not our responsibility, and not our fault. The municipality should clean the streets.

Alev knew that the garbage on nearby İstiklal Avenue was collected several times a day by the Beyoğlu Municipality. She stressed that waste management and street cleaning was the responsibility of the municipality, thereby offering a counter frame to the stigmatising narrative.

## Graffiti

Graffiti, in the way of slogans, signals, or indicating labels applied with a paintbrush or a spray can or hasty scribbles applied with pens, pieces of rock or coal, were a common sight in Tarlabası. These wall writings included political statements, profanities, names of people, or sometimes signs not to drop garbage in a certain place.<sup>6</sup> Twice I saw graffiti that expressed pride in the bad image of the neighbourhood: "This is Tarlabası, it's not just for anyone", and: "This is Tarlabası, not just anyone can enter". Paul Kirkness and Andreas Tijé-Dra (2017: 120) state that such hyperbolic claims, along with the performance of "being gangster" or belonging to "a ghetto", made by residents of tainted spaces, "can be perceived as small acts of affirmative transgression, appropriation and speaking back to depictions that are made outside the stigmatised neighbourhood". However, once I witnessed a very personal, very targeted version of using graffiti as a way to relay a message to those that had victimised Tarlabası.

In the end of October 2011, Alev and her family had to move out of their apartment after compulsory purchase proceedings had been finalised. Several of her cousins, uncles as well as her fiancé Özgür were helping them to carry furniture, bags, and boxes into a small lorry they had rented for the move. It was hard work, and while Alev and most of the men were lifting and carrying various items down the four flights of the narrow stairs, Alev's sister-in-law was cooking and serving lunch, tea, and coffee to the group of men who had come to help.

6 These signs very often aimed to shame those that did not comply with messages like: "Those that throw their garbage down here are bastards" etc.

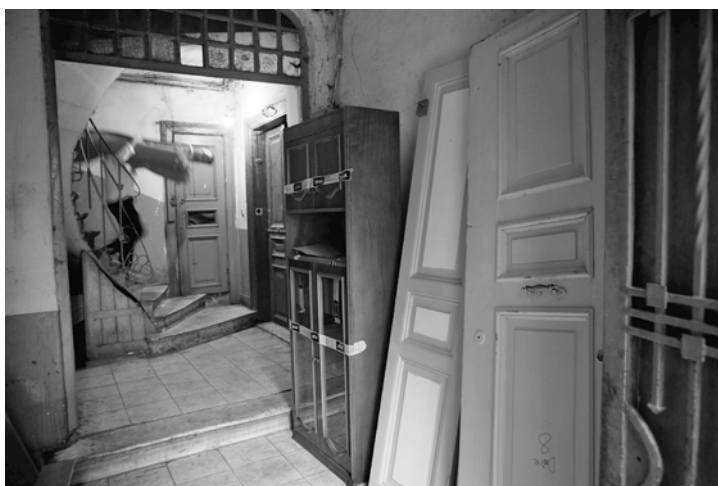
*Moving out of Tree Street*

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Alev was visibly emotional. Flitting through the apartment, she directed the move and paid attention that everything was being wrapped and handled appropriately. As room after room was emptied, Alev began to write slogans across the now bare walls of her former home. She used pencils and pens since she had nothing else at her disposal. For a moment, she also took to the walls with an electric screwdriver she had used to dismantle the furniture. She was only able to inflict limited damage using this tool, to the mocking laughter of her younger male cousins who said she should use a drill in order to cause more serious destruction, and soon joined her to scribble onto the walls. She was both sad and angry about being forced out of her home despite the legal fight she had put up. Inflicting this damage, limited and as it was, was both an outlet for that anger and a way to send the message to the municipality that she did not leave the house to them voluntarily.

The graffiti were all written in large font and included the crossed-out initials of then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “RTE”, the statement “I am Alev”, and the strong curses “May the hand of those that deny our rights break” and “May you get no benefit from it” [*Haram olsun*]. I will elaborate on the significance of this latter statement further down in this section. One of these slogans, written in Kurmanji Kurdish (It’s enough! [*Edi bese!*]), was a well-known political slogan of revolt, and by using it, Alev connected her personal grievance to the larger Kurdish political movement against state discrimination and for minority rights. In this sense, the political meaning could be read as a double protest that only a limited public, those that understood Kurmanji Kurdish and were familiar with the Kurdish rights movement, was able to fully understand.

However, the use of the Kurdish language is in itself an act of protest (Clark, 2016: 250). A Turkish monolingual audience would understand that a certain text object, like Alev’s slogan, was Kurdish, but they would not necessarily understand the intended (po-

litical) indexicality of that text object. Choosing to write in Kurdish “does the actual work of establishing boundaries that limit the access available to a bystander public gaze, while also ensuring that bystanders can register those boundaries, notice their lack of access-to-meaning and sense their exclusion” (ibid.). Alev had no way of knowing who, if anyone, would ever see what she had written. It was unclear to me whether she thought that Kurdish construction workers would see the graffiti before the demolition of the building, or whether she thought that any officials or executives from the municipality or GAP *Inşaat* would read what she had to say.

Research has shown that political graffiti as a communicative tool is especially important for those who have been marginalised, excluded from structures of social, economic, and political power and who do not have access to institutionalised forms of political participation, or who do not believe that mainstream politics will bring about the desired change. As such, political graffiti can function as a discursive form of political activism and of resistance to prevailing systems of power and control (Jaffe et. al. 2012: 3; Waldner and Dobratz 2013: 387; Li and Prasad 2018: 496).

Alev chose to write these slogans across the walls of her former apartment because she was angry, but also because she was not able to communicate these thoughts elsewhere. She wanted to convey a message that the addressee had otherwise refused to hear, and she chose to use political language to bring her criticism of the renewal project and those responsible for it across.

Graffiti, as a transgressive performance in space, have often been interpreted as public text objects. Some scholars distinguish between public and private graffiti, defining the latter as anonymous inscriptions indoors, such as inside prisons or universities (Abel and Buckley 1977; Schwartz and Dovidio 1984). However, the prevailing assumption is that all graffiti, public or private, aims to be read. In that sense, it did not matter that Alev chose to write on the walls inside the apartment and not, say, on the walls outside of the building. Bruner and Kelso (1980: 241), in their study of gendered semiotics of graffiti, allege that “although written in the privacy of a toilet stall, the writing of graffiti is an essentially social act. [...] To write graffiti is to communicate; one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others”. Graffiti, therefore, “whether written by pen, spray can, or paintbrush, it is always public and displayed on someone else’s property” (Wilson 2008). Alev had no way of knowing who would see the slogans she wrote, or if anyone would see them at all. However, she made her voice heard in a context where those in power refused to hear and listen to her. With the graffiti, some of which literally asserted her presence, Alev “writes herself into existence” (Carrington 2009: 420).

The evening of the same day, after all the furniture had been unloaded in the new apartment on the other side of Dolapdere Street, Alev returned to the empty, old apartment with two of her male cousins, to complete and add to the writings of the afternoon. They also smashed a few windows. Alev said that she wanted to vent her anger, and maybe even more importantly, show that she had not left the apartment to the municipality voluntarily and that she did not approve of the displacement.

## A teargas cartridge

In the height of summer 2011, Cemile and Ramazan lived out of cardboard boxes in their old home, waiting for someone from the municipality to take their keys from them and evict them from their house. The atmosphere was sombre. Cemile suffered from an infected toenail, and her big toe was wrapped in a bandage, making it difficult for her to walk. One day, while looking for something in her boxes, she pulled out a plastic bag. She held it up to me and her husband and started laughing.

What's in that bag? Oh look, do you remember this? It's our bomb! It's the bomb [the police] threw into our house. Let's leave it here for them, as a souvenir. They can keep that. I'll leave that behind here for them.

Inside the bag was an empty tear gas cartridge, a hollow silver cylinder that was open on one end, with blue letters on the sides. It had landed in the family's living room during 1 May demonstrations a couple of years prior, setting the living room curtains on fire and engulfing the entire room in a thick, biting fog. The police had never come to apologise for shooting the cartridge through the open living room window, and despite some neighbours urging them to do so, the family had never tried to press charges. For Cemile and Ramazan, this carelessness by the riot police had been another sign that they and their safety in the neighbourhood did not really matter. Cemile draped the open bag with the cartridge on the floor of the almost empty apartment, as "a souvenir" for the municipal delegation they were waiting for. It was not entirely clear if Cemile had kept the cartridge as a keepsake, or as potential evidence in case she did change her mind. However, with her eviction imminent and all communication with the municipality and the developers ruptured, she felt it could serve as a message she was going to leave behind for them.

## Helal olmasın

One day in November 2011, second-hand furniture seller Cemal, lute maker Kerem Usta, and Kurdish real estate agent, Burhan, all came together in the barber shop on Tree Street in one of the last get-togethers that I was able to witness there. Kerem Usta had not been to the barber shop in months (he usually got his shaves in his suburb). Halil Usta was in his element, administering shaves, trims, waxing, masks and massages. The summer "heroin rice pudding"<sup>7</sup> bust in the pudding shop on Tarlabası Boulevard provided hilarious gossip, but in general the mood was rather low. Most of the other residents and shop owners in the street had already left, and Halil Usta only came to Tarlabası intermittently now. He said that being in his shop had "lost all taste". The area around the barbershop looked desolate and ruined. While getting haircuts and shaves, the other

7 Burhan claimed that the owner of the shop had sold a "special" rice pudding that came with a serving of heroin on the side for customers in the know. The newspapers spoke of cocaine (Kaya, 2011). The shop had subsequently been shut down, and, since it was inside the renewal zone, it was going to be demolished in any case.



men wondered what would happen next. Halil Usta was angry. The municipality had victimised the neighbourhood, he said, throwing everyone out of their houses for no apparent reason, as it did not look like constructions would start anytime soon. Now, he said, the neighbourhood was left to rot, and property owners like Cemal were left without any rental income, and without a new home to move into. As a tenant, he felt like he had no recourse to any assistance from anyone, and due to evictions, he had lost most of his customers and his income, without the possibility to plan his next move. Since he had invested in and paid for a new PVC window and a door for his rental shop, he was angry that he would not get anything for either when his landlord sold the entire building to the developer. He asked the men in his shop what he should do, and Cemal replied that he should “break and take” them.

H: But I won't be able to sell them, it's worth nothing.

C: That's not the point. You should break out and take all of it, the metal [parts], too. You should take the wood and burn it.

The expression Cemal used to justify his advice, that would arguably only mean more work for Halil Usta, was *helal olmasın*: this phrase, loosely translated as “not waiving one's rights”, or “not forgiving another person's mistakes against oneself”<sup>8</sup>. Since Halil Usta was not able to communicate his pain and discontent directly to project stakeholders, the breaking and scavenging of parts of his shop, even if it would not provide any financial gain, would be a message to the municipality that the transaction was made without his consent and without his blessing.

Similar in meaning to the much stronger, more curse-like *haram olsun* scribbled by Alev on the empty walls of her former home, the angrily uttered *helal olmasın* was an expression I heard quite often in relation to people being evicted from their house in Tarlabası if they felt that they had been cheated, lied to, and betrayed by the municipality. Following the unannounced visit by the police at the house of Cemile and Ramazan during the month of Ramadan in 2011, Ramazan used a crowbar and a large hammer to break and pry the PVC window frames and the balcony door out of the walls. His intervention made them unusable and broke pieces out of the brick walls that lay strewn about the floors and caused hindrance while Cemile and Ramazan were still living in the apartment. But Ramazan had been angry and said that he just did not want to leave these new windows that they had bought and were still paying instalments for at the time, to the developer. Later on, he explained that he could not forgive them taking their house, and making him feel duped, and, as he said, “like an idiot”: “I swear that I want them to feel like idiots themselves. *Allah* should make them feel like idiots, too. I swear that I will not forgive them for mistakes they have committed against me! [*Yemin ederim hakkim helal olmasın onlara!*]” He and Cemile used the phrase *helal olmasın* many times during the last

8 The more commonly used expression is “*helal olsun*”, a phrase often used in a business transaction, for example meant to seal a consensual exchange. The Turkish “*helal*” is derived from the Arabic “*halal*” and refers to “legitimate”, “rightful”. The speaker is not active, which means that the outcome is dependent on something or someone outside of oneself. The expression has a deeply moral aspect.

days in their apartment, and the (self-)destruction wreaked upon the apartment was a desperate message to the municipality that had, at that point, long ceased to listen or care.

*Welding shut an evicted building*



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Other residents who were evicted scavenged wood and metal as a way not to leave entirely empty handed. Kemal had rented an additional small lorry to be able to transport the stacks of firewood he took from the house when he left it: chopped up wooden floors, beams, and the old staircase that, he argued, would be more use to him in his new home where he only had a small oven for heating. Kemal also took as much of the metal appliances and plumbing as he managed to pry loose in the house that at the time did not belong to his landlord anymore, but to the municipality. Such transgressive spatial practices were a way to defy, or in the case of Kemal, make use of the invisibility that the stigmatisation of Tarlaşaşı had relegated its residents to.

The stigmatisation of Tarlaşaşı had an impact on the ways that Tarlaşaşı residents could make themselves heard, and, as we have seen, it often made it impossible to shape and circulate their own narrative. However, residents did not just accept being silenced. As project stakeholders and the non-resident community refused to hear what they had to say about their displacement and their dispossession, they deployed various symbolic struggles to pierce through the discursive wall that smothered their voices. They used verbally expressed their anger, even if they almost never did so to the faces of project stakeholders. These struggles were speech acts that remained small and toothless, but it is nevertheless important to notice them and pull them apart in order to analyse and understand how residents reacted to territorial stigma and how they navigated their erasure. People deployed counternarratives, gossip and name calling. They also deployed material struggles, such as the inscription of messages, or leaving behind a certain object

that, at the very least, meant to express their disdain. As we have seen from the anecdote of Kemal's failed eviction, the crack in the seamless façade of the municipal discourse also revealed a highly interesting dissonance between the legal contract, the only contract that project stakeholders said they found binding, and the social contract, the social norms and expectations that underlie interactions in the neighbourhood and in Turkish society. The question of how this incongruity is impacted by stigma is one that still has to be answered.

*Leaving nothing behind*



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

