

Introduction: Public Space as a Critical Concept. Adequate for Understanding Istanbul Today?

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Bridges have tremendous impacts on cities. They are defining geographic markers lending its inhabitants a sense of orientation. In Istanbul, especially the famous Galata Bridge has shaped our perception of the city. The bridges crossing the Bosphorus are not only vital conductors of traffic between the European and Asian side of the city, moreover, they offer a perspective, which defines the city. To understand the city without these symbolic elements would leave Istanbul's sense of urbanity devoid of its essence.

Imagination is one of the most powerful aspects of urban life (Pile 2000). As the American sociologist Robert E. Park once said, cities are a »state of mind«. In the same way we can understand Istanbul as being lived by its metaphorical landscape which is? Most visible in the built environment, but is also expressed in less visible arteries of the sciences and arts. Istanbul offers a rich variety of symbolic spaces, which are perceived as emotional, abstract and concrete places. In daily life, this complexity often remains unrecognized, as human beings respond to encounters and various situations, according to their definition of them.

In this way, Istanbul as one city falls apart as it delivers different spaces for tourists, rural migrants, global entrepreneurs, and socially stratified inhabitants. The function of public places in the different phases of city development seemed always to be that they offer some kind of interference between separated parts of Istanbul. In the past, the Galata Bridge captured a special quality, as the bridge was not only a

place for traffic but also a place for markets. People went to the bridge to buy and sell, to meet, to perceive the city and the others; they went there to be there. Nowadays, people still want to have a view to the Bosphorus bridges, although the bridge is no place to stay.

The example of the bridges shows that places can offer important and often unexpected meanings for our understanding of the city. Perhaps in contradiction with their intended functions, bridges are places in which perspectives are gathered: perspectives of different people, strangers and natives alike, creating a common understanding of what is worth looking at. It creates positive icons in a diverse, complex, and often difficult city life. In this way, a subtle manner of exchange between individuals from various backgrounds shapes a »sphere« of Istanbul with different aspects. In the first place, this creates an »atmosphere« which might not be sensed by all, but it can be an important factor to many people in their perception and experience of the city (Böhme 2006). Its social significance, however, lies in the structure that it gives to our perception and which is as a point of reference in the urban discourse with others about it. The planned reality of Istanbul and the constantly changing urban geography of this metropolitan area, however, makes it necessary to distinguish between places of private and public meaning. This is a process in which places become public by making them a symbolical space (Watson 2002).

From an analytical point of view, examining public spaces in Istanbul remains a confusing task. In our observations, we are frequently guided both by different perceptions and the need for a concept that captures the particularity of Istanbul. There are different ways to understand, observe and produce public spaces, but the meaning society gives to the spaces and the relationships society establishes with these spaces are crucial. Istanbul's position at the border of Europe and Asia, not only render it difficult to apply complex terminologies such as »European city« or »Middle Eastern city«, as »global city« or »mega-city«, but also overshadow general understandings of the relationships between space and society.

Max Weber's theoretical distinction between European and Asian cities, in which he characterized the »European city«, by its ability to bridge differences among social groups through public encounters, has guided our concept of European cities (Weber 2000). If we understand the »public space« as a composition of concrete place and a specific form of social life, that what might be called the »sphere« of the public, than the empirical difference often connected to its categorization are questionable. As historians have made clear, the European city never fully embodied this ideal concept, nor is the Asian city free of a public

sphere (Bruhns/Nippel 2000). Many of Habermas' observations regarding the emergence of the public sphere in British, French, and German modern society since the 19th century is also true for Middle Eastern societies. As Jakob Skovgard-Peterson states: »As in Europe, the public sphere in the Middle East ideally comprised everyone. In practice it was quite exclusivist« (2001: 13).

If these ideal concepts are taken for granted, however, the debate regarding the significance of public space in Istanbul is in danger of being misleading and fruitless. Perspectives on Istanbul as perceived through a »European« or »Middle East/Asian« lens may stand in the way of an analysis that considers recent developments in Istanbul. Questions such as to what extent the city is still »European« and how the city is incorporated into the Middle East are focal points of many discussions and debates concerning Istanbul today. Nonetheless, the term »European City« may be helpful if it is applied to the discourse in a sociological way, excluding political, cultural, historical, and economical contexts. This narrowed view which neglects the nexus between spaces and of society – as described by Weber, Arendt, and Habermas – has become prominent in many planning discourses:

»Allee, boulevard, campo, and piazza – nothing defines the picture of the European city and its public space like these spaces. To walk as a flaneur, to communicate, to meander like a cosmopolitan through the city, to be relaxed in the rushing city life – nothing characterizes the image of the urbanites more than their behaviour in the public spaces.« (Selle 2004: 131)

Taking a closer look on Istanbul and its spaces requires a selective perspective on what might be qualified as »public«, being both place and sphere. There are particular subjects to be found in Istanbul which are beyond the overstressed concepts discussed so far. Similarly, as a consequence of globalization, the profound reshaping of Istanbul's cultural dimensions has resulted in the establishment of new patterns in cross boarder public encounters (Öncü 1997).

New conceptual approaches that have the ability to contend with Istanbul's sensitivities are called for. Contributors to this book grapple with such approaches in an effort to understand and analyze the changing character of Istanbul. Implicit questions are present in the attempt to understand as much as possible of what recently becomes important in the development of Istanbul and what still is significant from its divers history as city between East and West, Christianity and Islam, modernity and tradition. While Istanbul is a city, which for decades has attracted people from rural areas in pursuit of a better life, the city has more re-

cently been following a pattern of growth incomparable to any other city in Europe. Here, the mechanisms of the social construction of space by public spheres can be traced clearly. By changing the social labeling of those places occupied by the new settlers (Özbakay 2006) and the conflicted pattern of »insiders« and »outsiders«, well known in modern cities since Elias and Scotson's famous study (1990) – has become the main logic for Istanbul's new social geography.

The significance of the public is then altered, challenged, and maybe even lost. This is true, at least if we continue to think of Istanbul's public spaces in a way that relates it to particular places. Again, the shift in the former construction of public places to Istanbul's current less tangible contemporary meaning and generation of »public« might become easier to understand if we return to examples of the bridges. In the past, the Galata Bridge was a locally well-known and an often frequented place where the relationship between presence and perception was highly interrelated with one another. Today, in the global era, the Bosphorus bridges are common public sphere for everybody. They are symbolic spaces which must be perceived against the background of Istanbul's fragmented metropolitan area which lacks places that give expression to the new (automobile) mobility of the city, its fast growth, and new spatial orders.

This might lead to the conclusion that »abstract«, »far«, »social«, and »political« elements in public spaces are increasingly important in what is captured by the ambivalence of the term »public«. In the same vein, the re-consideration of space has been the main debate in the urban studies discipline during the 90s. With the emergence of a post-modern geography (which is no longer making difference between description, empirical evidence and analysis) stated in its most radical positions that the dimension of the particular »urban« seems to be disappearing. As a result, urban concepts now need to be regarded against the city's regionalization (Eckardt 2005). Istanbul with its past period of hyper-growth appeared to support this line of argument. Already, the recognition of the fact that Kemalist state architecture supported a decline in the significance of the local public (Bozdoğan 1994) questions to what extent the term »public« is related to the spatiality of Istanbul.

It is imperative that the conceptualization of public space in Istanbul takes discourses, political and planning regulations and prerogatives, imagined and perceived dimensions of the public, into sincere consideration. In others words, the »sphere« of public Istanbul is no longer only a matter of »atmo«-sphere; it has instead become the crucial point of analysis.

In this regard, the problem is that the concept of »public space« derives from theoretical and empirical considerations which neglect the multifaceted dimensions of cities like Istanbul: complex, diverse, multi-layered, antagonistic and overlapping, homogeneous and heterogeneous and everything at the same time, the same place. Is then the term »public« still adequate? If the argumentation presented above remains, abstract conceptualization will not suffice to answer this question. Instead we must turn to the debate of the city's publicness in the context of its diverse settings of meanings, expectations, patterns of behavior, and visualizations in terms of place and aesthetics. No single theory will be presented in this book – whether we examine Hannah Arendt's »public« concept, elaborated on the experience of the Greek polis, or analyze Jürgen Habermas's works, referring to the public realm understood against the background of the emergence of a Western European democracy, all of these theories and conceptualizations can be used as a theoretical framework to understand Istanbul's public realm.

Through their examination of Istanbul's places of periphery, city walls, gated communities, new urban planning processes, and gentrified neighborhoods, the contributors to this book trace the city's representation and therefore its »publicness«. Collectively these spatial formations intrinsically testify to the overall hypothesis of post-modern discourses on the city. The questions posed by Habermas and Arendt, however, are not overcome, obsolete or even solved. If the project of modernity is not complete, as Habermas (2004) argues, then modern science and the modern city are more than just simply components of a postmodern pot-pourri. In contrast, re-reading the classical works of both Habermas and Arendt lead scholars to reformulate their questions in an effort to understand the problem of the public sphere. Habermas' work shows that public opinion and the public sphere are closely related and should be regarded in its embeddedness of democracy (Habermas 1990). By showing how the definition of the private depends on the emergence of a public, he points out that only the separation of both spheres has enabled the process of political representation and the establishment of a liberal state. In his analysis, Habermas however expresses his deep concern that these achievements are threatened by mass society, as the individual is no longer able to influence the process of creating public opinion or be part of the public sphere. Power relationships are re-established where few decide in the name of many. In this process, the public is »re-feudalized«. Read in the context of urban research, Habermas' analysis extends the debate concerning the relationships between private and public state, the role of the state, and the requirements of public sphere to fulfill its democratic function.

The principal distinction between the »public« and the »private«, as Hannah Arendt (2002) argues is profoundly incorporated in all forms of democracy as it is based on a lifestyle where the public is a distinct place to realize the noble ideas of individual sense seeking. The public is a place of virtue and not intended for private activities. It is the arena in which decisions are made in favor of the common good. Far from being idealistic, Arendt points out that public place can only fulfill its function, which is to defend the city as a collective space, by allowing the individual to have a sense for the »*bonum commune*«, the pursuit of the shared happiness. As a precondition, private matters and concerns must be conducted outside the public sphere. While many observers of the privatization of public places are frightened by the fact that these places lose their accessibility, Arendt's analysis questions the common contemporary argumentation in Istanbul and elsewhere, that private property is favorable to the whole society.

However, while Istanbul might be viewed as leaving behind closed narratives of the »European city«, the »mega-city«, or the »global city« these narratives remain open, and in the case of Istanbul are reformulated in a double sense. The public realm and the function of public opinion are the most important pillars of modern society; the encounter of citizens on a plaza is therefore still an emblematic vision (cp. Watson 2005), but questions concerning the free sociability of a city under the impacts of flows of urbanism, globalization, cumulating social exclusion, and civic and cultural fragmentation arise. Then, attempts to answer these questions seems to be an illusionary project. Nevertheless, a critical lackmuss proof how much it is still possible to narrate about Istanbul has to be taken. Secondly, the space of public in Istanbul arrives at a moment where attention for places beyond the existing and still powerful narratives such as the limited city, center-periphery, Istanbul as administrative, cultural, political, social and economic entity, is increasingly creating confusion. There is a common sense among the authors of this book that the abolition of the modern city's master-narrative has little explanatory power for the understanding of contradictory public spheres that the new spaces of Istanbul embody. More has to be taken into account, more places have to be analyzed in their relation to the public space of the city, more encounters with the intermediate function of institutions and actors have to follow, before a new orientation on Istanbul might appear in its contours.

Approaching the city in this way means foremost to search for a more adequate, inspiring, promising, and inclusive strategy to create a better understanding of the world of Istanbul. The contributions in this part of the book are showing the struggle encountered by the authors. On

one hand, they write about a particular place and on the other hand, they endeavor to link specific experiences to a general mode of analysis and use theoretical concepts to explain urban developments. The confrontation of local examples with urban theories remains a major motive for urban scholars and is a good reason to have a closer look at the public space in Istanbul.

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