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Beyond the Neighbourhood and the Urban Sphere

Boundaries and mixed lifeworlds in 21st century Beyoğlu¹

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Istanbul consists of diverse neighbourhoods; some extend over vast areas in a porous fashion and merge with others seamlessly, while others are sharply delineated with unmistakable geographic and/or symbolic boundaries. I argue that rather than geographic locations, the classification and overlap of the spatial orders of the neighbourhood (*mahalle*) and the urban sphere, with their corresponding moral frameworks, is crucial in understanding the societal dynamics of Istanbul. By spatial order I refer to an historically grounded spatial arrangement, an ordering of social relations and a sense of moral appropriateness that is both abstract and embodied and can be applied to very different environments. Some characteristics of the *mahalle* and the urban sphere coexist in the same space, often contradicted with other features and connected to the historical master narratives of modernity and tradition, individual and community, authenticity and cultural corruption. Spatial orders can also be employed as pure abstractions. Çağlar Keyder argues that there is a genre in Turkish literature and cinema that maps the neighbourhoods onto attitudes and emotional charges of separation organized along lines of Westernizers and defenders of cultural authenticity (2008:507). I argue that these categories are still available, but the divisions have

¹ The text is based on the author's Ph.D. thesis *Moral Qualities of Space, Historical Consciousness and Symbolic Boundaries in the Beyoğlu District of Istanbul* (Helsinki 2016).

transformed considerably—they have become more complex and incorporate novel configurations of modernity, authenticity, and selfhood, sometimes bearing only slight resemblance to their earlier forms.

Mahalle and the Urban Sphere

In Istanbul, the qualities of space are routinely evaluated with emphasis on their aesthetic features, residential patterns, and appropriate practices linked to moral principles. The term *mahalle*, an Arabic loanword denoting the smallest administrative unit in the city,² extends its meaning to institutions within a neighbourhood. “Neighbourhood mosque” (*mahalle camii*) and “neighbourhood school” (*mahalle mektebi*) are common examples but the term can also be used with connotations to “neighbourhood mentality” (*mahalle baskısı*), morality, and atmosphere. In these cases, the term *mahalle* is used as an adjective, widely recognized but also ambiguous with regard to its positive and negative qualities.

The concrete living conditions in the *mahalle* reflect the turbulent relations of the past, present, and future. Atatürk’s republican reforms employed the dichotomy between the city and village as the quintessential dynamic of the civilizational dialogue, but they also targeted *mahalles* as obstacles to development. While the reformers favoured the syncretic Alevi³ traditions of Anatolian villages as traces of the authentic Turkish essence, the religiously conservative dimension of the urban *mahalle* was seen as a hindrance. Şerif Mardin describes how the reformers were on a quest

to establish a ‘new collective identity’ where religion was no longer of any determining power, and were intended to liberate the individual from the ‘idiocy of traditional, community-oriented life.’ The secularization of daily social life and the independence of the individuals could only be realized by breaking the traditional social relation-

² This, of course, means that the whole city can be divided into *mahalles*, also its urban sphere. For example, *Asmalı Mescit Mahallesi* in Beyoğlu has İstiklal Street as its boundary all the way from Tünel Square to Galatasaray Square. My use of the term acknowledges the administrative functions—*mahalle* as a unit governed by an elected *mubtar*—but emphasizes its sociocultural definition.

³ Alevism is a heterodox branch of Islam, with elements from Twelver Shia Islam and the Bektasî order. There are approximately 10 million Alevites in Turkey.

ships and destroying the power of the imam at the local level of the mahalle (in Gül 2006:79).

Here, the *mahalle* represents an enclosed world, an entity binding the lives of the inhabitants together with specific spaces. Murat Gül highlights its importance to the life of an average inhabitant who would “undertake his primary education, obtain his professional or occupational skills, arrange his marriage, celebrate the birth of his children and receive a funeral ceremony on his death” (2006:79) within the confines of the same *mahalle*. Modernist ideas of urbanity challenged this way of life forcefully, emphasizing cities organized rationally as egalitarian spaces for citizens who were expected to voluntarily abandon their earlier senses of community.

According to this view, the lifeworld situated in a bounded space of a *mahalle* is related to a distinct kind of sociality, expressed in networks that cannot realize their full potential because of their traditional and hierarchical character. It is opposed to the independence of individuals, citizens of the emerging Republic who would gradually escape the domination associated with the stagnant past. Nowadays, I argue, the focus of the debate has shifted from the ideal of producing citizens loyal to the Republican ethos, to questions of liberal mindset and democracy—defined in opposition to corruption and majoritarian rule. The earlier ethos of social engineering to improve national well-being has transformed into a more abstract conception, associated with the capability of independent thought. Elizabeth Özdalga gives an excellent definition of *mahalle* mentality in opposition to liberal modernity:

“Mahalle baskısı,” or small-town (or neighbourhood) mentality, is the kind of pressure any dominating majority population may exert on individuals who want to take their destiny into their own hands, i.e. who object to following in the tracks of mainstream society. The social setting for such pressure is usually a closed, communitarian community where personal control may be highly affected. It goes without saying that this kind of pressure belongs to milieus where a liberal and democratic spirit is weak or lacking.⁴

⁴ Özdalga, Elisabeth. Today's Zaman 25.9.2007 <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-122997-mahalle-baskisi-small-town-mentality-by-elisabeth-ozdalga-.html>

Yet, the people who were at the focus of my ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul's *mahalles* felt that they had a more democratic and just community within the boundaries of their *mahalle*. They habitually took pride in mastering both environments, the close-knit communal setting of the *mahalle*, and the urban sphere around the famous Istiklal Street. However, the divide between the lifeworlds was not unproblematic. Şivan, a 29-year old Kurdish migrant to Istanbul who lived in the poverty-stricken Tarlabası, just a short walk from the urban centre, elaborated this complexity in his everyday life. As he told me,

On a good day, I can balance the two lives that I have, to feel at home in Tarlabası and go to Istiklal to enjoy the freedom [*özgürlük*]. On a bad day, I feel that I am not welcome here and that I have nowhere else to go—I cannot stand the hopelessness of the buildings of Tarlabası slowly crumbling down and the neighbours following my every step, but even less the people who look down on me and make clear that I should be somewhere else.

Especially for those lacking the right credentials, balancing between the two spatial orders is serious work, constant deliberation of spatial attributes and moral qualities that can have profound consequences for their lives.

The relationship between the individual and the community plays a significant role in defining the limits of access to different spaces. In the semi-private space of the *mahalle*, the life of the residents extends from their homes into the streets, and individual buildings—even whole streets—are often inhabited by people who originate from the same region in Turkey; itinerant vendors and handymen provide their services within specific areas and inhabitants protect their boundaries. In contrast, Istiklal Street is an embodiment of the modernist urban sphere; a linear arrangement cutting across districts that provides a supposedly egalitarian space for citizens to promenade at all times of the day. The accessibility of *mahalles* is also tied to temporality and requires intimate knowledge of their rhythms: they can welcome visitors during street markets, often assigned to specific weekdays, or organize cultural events that temporarily allow unrestricted access. Following a shorter cycle, their boundaries are unguarded to a degree in the daytime, but visitors are not expected in their vicinity after the dark. It is important to note that many of the spaces in the city exhibit combination of *mahalle*-like and modernist urbanity, not as exhaustively defined qualities, but something that arises through negotiation and dialogue. When

Şivan referred to neighbours following his every step, he meant that the sense of control was not limited to the outsiders but an all-encompassing fact of life, so that he occasionally needed to escape to the freedom of İstiklal Street.

Şivan and his friends would see the desirable environment of the *mahalle* as emphasizing communal ties, Islamic values, and self-governance. They contrasted this with the soulless existence of urbanites, often characterized as *sabıpsız* and *terbiyesiz* (unmannerly, badly brought up), unable to act according to community norms, not showing proper respect, and being outside the networks of solidarity and obligations (see Mango 2004:126). They were not characteristics of individual freedom but rather equated with exclusion and isolation. In order to understand this dynamic, it is essential to examine how the spatial arrangement of the urban sphere relates to the *mahalles*.

İstiklal street – the modern spatial arrangement of the boulevard

It can be a striking experience to leave the labyrinthine alleys of a typical *mahalle* such as Tarlabaşı and enter into a wide and straight boulevard. There is more air and light, and it is possible to see further than the next corner with no need to carefully survey the loose cobblestones. The mass of people brings with it a promise of surprise, the possibility to see something new and attractive on every visit, contrary to *mahalles*, where novelty is the exception from the routines of the everyday. Yet, the properties of urban space are not restricted to sensory stimuli but are constantly related to historical formations and senses of sociality. İstiklal Street is based on the model of a wide Parisian boulevard rather than the spatial arrangements associated with the pre-modern Ottoman times. In the most general terms, the historical dynamic lies in the difference between individual and community: İstiklal Street has a historical foundation as an egalitarian urban space, a site of self-expression, self-realization, and tolerance, in contrast to the surrounding neighbourhoods where people have been defined by their similarity and uniform ways of life as part of a community (Özyürek 2006:76; Robins and Aksoy 1995:229). Moreover, in Turkey there is a significant difference that sets İstiklal Street apart on the basis of its uniqueness:

Neither a street, nor a neighbourhood [...] For at least two centuries it has been the most significant space where Turks who want to make an individual cultural preference have expressed their choice. (Özgüven 2008:156)

In concrete terms, Istiklal Street (*İstiklâl Caddesi*), formerly called *Grande Rue de Péra* by the Europeans, or *Cadde-i Kebir* (Grand Street) by the Ottoman Turks, is a boulevard of 1.4 kilometres, pedestrianized in 1988, that connects Tünel Square, on the top of the hill rising from the Galata Bridge, with Taksim Square. Extremely crowded almost around the clock, it brings together people from different backgrounds more than any other place in Istanbul. It is also a place that most of the Turkish tourists add to their itineraries when visiting Istanbul.



Istiklal Caddesi, view over Galatasaray square in the direction of Taksim. Photo: Olof Heilo

It is a platitude to say that Istiklal Street represents the culmination of Turkish modernity. Even so, an ethnographic project that takes seriously the everyday

interaction cannot ignore the fatigued metaphors: one's relationship with modernity, its reach, range, or misappropriation is explored relentlessly by people who essentialize its meaning and stretch the boundaries of the concept, sometimes with specific aims in their mind. The centrality of the street is expressed in sociospatial terms, relating it to other spaces, and as a historical construction, reflecting on the abundance of its historical sediments and layers. Commentaries on *Istiklal*'s modernity consist of rearrangements of the palimpsest, shifts in the frame of reference, and reflection on its different attributes. They emphasize the internalized experience and embodied knowledge of the city, recognize the generalizations and stereotypes, and often focus on the informal characteristics and unexpected transformations in the lived environment, rather than the uniform trajectory of developmentalist modernity.

The immediate perception of *Istiklal* Street is relatively ordered and uniform. Along its course, the ground floor establishments consist predominantly of large international chain-stores such as Nike or Levi's, alongside coffee houses and restaurants of both multinational and Turkish varieties. This is *Istiklal* Street in its quintessential form, attracting all kinds of people to spend money or just to stroll around, back and forth, along the street. The extreme crowdedness is one of its principal features; the stock photographs of the street come across as either depicting this multitude or its absence: the deserted street during a snowstorm or heavy rain. For Turks not familiar with Istanbul, the word *Beyoğlu* has connotations only with *Istiklal* Street, Taksim Square, and perhaps the nostalgic representations of the early Republican past. The organization of its more detailed contours gets easily lost amidst the dominant currents.

On closer look, the urban space of Istanbul's central district of *Beyoğlu* does not fit neatly into a framework of equal units of measurable space. The area consists of intersecting and differently valued domains, divided into individual streets, bounded neighbourhoods, or larger wholes, with their different characteristics. The ways people classify and evaluate different spaces at variable scales and embody their differences in their daily practices is directly connected to the formation of groups and solidarities in *Beyoğlu*. In the work of defining spatial orders, the abstract notions operate together with the lived realities. Some of the frameworks resemble the established distinctions between the widely shared fault lines, others are significant for smaller segments of the population and many of the most crucial ones are based on the individual experiences of the city.

Spaces of freedom and limits of tolerance

Sivan often mentioned that he was addicted to the urbanity of Istiklal Street, but this had not always been the case. At first, after moving to Istanbul ten years ago, he had been afraid of the masses of people and did not know how to behave. He had spoken only elementary Turkish and was nervous of people approaching him: "I could not relax when I had all these weird people around me. I just did not know how to relate to them and was scared that something bad would happen," he said, and pointed at one of the familiar characters, a small man with watery eyes, who wandered around the area every day with a scale to weigh people for small change, a common substitute for begging in Istanbul. "It is not that someone like him would look scary, but everything here felt unpredictable. Now I have learned to enjoy the surprises and feel myself at home. It is rather the normal-looking people who think that I should not be here that bother me." This sense of freedom pointed to the area as an experimental site, a kind of laboratory for prototyping representations, expressions, and solidarities. The tolerance associated with the urban sphere united appearances and moral principles into a distinct mode of being, vastly different from the *mahalles*. It was not wholly specific to Istanbul but relied on the possibilities of social control and the expectations of the nature of the encounters, at the heart of what boulevards have signified historically (Berman 1982; Mitchell 1988; Scott 1998).

Boulevards have long historical roots of bringing potentially explosive elements together. Marshall Berman argues that pacifying the masses by employing them in large numbers for the construction, and creating long and broad corridors for the troops and artillery to move against the popular insurrections, were the factors that introduced boulevards in nineteenth-century France (1982:150; also Scott 1998:61). Their societal impact was, however, much more far-reaching. Tearing down the medieval slums enabled the urban poor to walk out of their neighbourhoods to explore the life in other districts (Berman 1982:153). On the other hand, the public space of the boulevard, connecting urban areas, also helped the wealthier segments of society to see the very different social realities of the poor, which were otherwise not accessible to them. Berman notes the inherent paradox within modern boulevards as a perfect symbol of capitalism's inner contradictions: "rationality in each individual capitalist unit, leading to anarchic irrationality in the social system that brings all these units together" (159).

Berman continues with an argument of how roads with different characteristics can have remarkable social effects. Interestingly, his analysis mirrors the development at my primary field site, albeit in a different timescale than proposed here:

The distinctive sign of nineteenth-century urbanism was the boulevard, a medium of bringing explosive material and human forces together; the hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism has been the highway, a means for putting them asunder. (1982:165)

What Berman defines as the attributes of the highway are, in Istanbul, located just around the corner from Istiklal Street. Busy Tarlabası Boulevard, the boundary that most of my informants living in Tarlabası crossed several times a day, possessed the characteristics of the classic boulevard only in its name.⁵ With only a few traffic lights and underpasses, it sliced between the impoverished inner-city neighbourhood and the world-famous urban centre. Thus, both varieties of prototypically modern roads, connecting and separating districts, were running parallel within just a few blocks distance, with wide-ranging consequences to the sociospatial makeup of the city.

It is telling of the spatial orders of the *mahalle* and the urban sphere how, in the case of Tarlabası, the demolition of the turn-of-century Levantine houses to make way for the wide road was justified as a moral project. In the 1980s, the demolition officer Fevzi Aydın claimed: “We want to clean up Beyoğlu. We are going to clean out the vermin from their nests.”⁶ These same tones were echoed approximately twenty years later regarding the huge urban renewal project of Tarlabası, associated with the renewal of an area of 20,000 square metres. A police officer commented on the situation to the press: “After years of swatting at mosquitoes, the swamp will now be drained.”⁷ The battles over moral appropriateness, entangled with the spatial orders, have been fought in these locations

⁵ In contemporary usage, the term boulevard often refers to wide thoroughfares with busy traffic. I follow Berman’s (1982) use of the term as a site of gathering and social interaction.

⁶ Wrigley, Patrick. Guernica 27.6.2013 <https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/patrick-wrigley-menace-to-society/>

⁷ Watson, Ivan. NPR 15.7.2007 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11965693>

with different labels over centuries, and they still spark fresh confrontations over desired forms of urban life.



Tarlabası was cut off from the rest of Beyoğlu in the 1980s when several buildings were demolished in order to create Tarlabası Bulvarı, a main thoroughfare to Taksim. The current renewal project (pictured) is aiming at elevating the status of a stigmatised area. Photo: Pekka Tuominen

Conclusion

Streets, roads, and pathways are never just enablers of transport, but lend themselves to culturally intimate categories. As a spatial arrangement, Istiklal Street forms a relatively straight line of roughly equal width that, according to the modernist logic of egalitarian urbanity, should connect individuals as equal units sharing the space. However, it would be insufficient to think about this space as solely revealing “in material form the determining presence of a non-material plan or meaning” (Mitchell 1988:54–55). More than a spatial arrangement, Istiklal Street is filled with intersecting and contradictory representations and narratives, subject to reinterpretations, and occupies a unique position as a space to make a statement on what Turkish modernity and urbanity mean.

In an egalitarian urban sphere the sense of equality does not mean sameness, but rather a promise of freedom, very different to other spaces of the city. The dichotomy between the *mahalle* and the urban sphere often parallels the reified historical patterns of the Ottoman city and its Republican modernist counterpart. However, their qualities do not conform just to a specific historical period but to an entanglement of different principles of ordering space and history. Often essentialized and simplified to the extreme, they become embodied moral frameworks as well as abstract principles guiding orientation, movement, sense of belonging, and solidarity. Their moral frameworks can be related to communities providing mutual assistance and security over their areas, or, by crossing the boundary, to the sense of escaping the suffocating atmosphere of watchful eyes of the *mahalle* into the space of freedom, realized and experienced even in the act of walking the boulevard from one end to another. The contemporary spatial orders are formed in integrating the cosmopolitan city of the Ottoman times into the Republican modernity of the Turkish nation, and further, into the neoliberal realities of the present day.

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