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Berra Topçu
btopcu@anthro.umass.edu

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“Don’t Sell Your Neighbor”:

Class, Urban Politics, and Grassroots Mobilizations in Old Town Istanbul

Berra Topçu

Abstract

The city has become the site of global movements and class struggles in the past decade. Since the Gezi uprising in the summer of 2013 in Istanbul, grassroots movements are emerging from the space of the neighborhood and the megacity in response to failures of urban governance at the level of metropolitan and local municipalities. Based on a five-month ethnographic study in a central district of Istanbul, I use participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and media and document analysis to explore what common ground can be found in the context of: 1) official city assemblies of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality; 2) activist-led urban resistance assemblies; and 3) grassroots mobilizations in an urban poor neighborhood by the historic city walls. From Henri Lefebvre (2009) to David Harvey (2012), the “right to the city” framework needs to be reworked to ground the city and the grassroots (Castells 1983) as the emergent site of class struggles as well as class solidarities. Following Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat’s (2013) typology of the three urban commons, this paper explores how ethnographically grounded accounts can be given from the specificity and generality of urban struggles, based on perspectives by expert and non-expert subjects, including residents, activists, reporters, planners, and officials. I argue for attending to the small-scale of the neighborhood and the large-scale of the megacity to build and make sense of urban social movements from the bottom-up.

(I. INTRODUCTION

“I was struck yesterday when I saw eight or ten apartments for sale on my way walking here. Most of these people are selling their homes and leaving to prevent it or not to encounter it in the near future. So they will be gone, especially when you have urban renewal everywhere. See the hotel there, it’s been under construction for months. We’ve been hearing these since 2010, that this is the real reason behind urban renewal in Fatih: They want to decrease the population in the historic center. They don’t want us here.” (Local Resident and Municipal Employee)

A decade after the Istanbul earthquake of 1999, entire neighborhoods of Istanbul are being “transformed” and “renewed” on the grounds of an impending disaster risk or due to being stigmatized “depressed zones” by local municipalities. A graffiti campaign of the working-class district of Gaziosmanpaşa’s Housing Rights Initiative (Barınma Hakki Meclisi) in May 2014 against urban renewal read: “Don’t sign. Don’t sell your neighbor. Don’t take from others what’s not yours.” (İmza atma. Komşunu satma. Kul hakkı yeme.) (see Figure 1). This was a call to residents to be wary of top-down planning practices by local municipalities which claim to be participatory by persuading residents one by one. What does it mean to “sell your neighbor” in the context of urban renewal debates in Istanbul today? How do such public sentiments signal the breaking down of class solidarities on the one hand while mobilizing grassroots resistance through neighborhood mobilizations on the other?
The term urban transformation itself (kentsel dönüşüm in Turkish) has become a politically loaded and fraught term as part of the shift toward a “neoliberal” mode in the governance of urban land and housing markets in Turkey since 2001, with what has been characterized as “state-led property transfers” (Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010) as part of Istanbul’s “neoliberal urbanism” (Öniş and Şenses 2009; Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu 2008). While case studies vary, scholars agree that these were made possible through legal gray zones exploited systematically to dispossess and displace urban poor communities in the city center while promising middle class house ownership for others and profit for developers politically close to the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. Buying and selling homes and property has become part of mundane talks for the new middle classes in Istanbul, thereby creating winners and losers. Similar to populated working-class districts such as Gaziosmanpaşa, Bağcılar, Zeytinburnu, and Kağıthane, the urban poor in the inner city are left to contend with top-down urban renewal plans, often not on their terms. By looking at grassroots movements and neighborhood-based mobilizations in the historic old town, this paper explores the following research questions: 1) What are contested responses by different stakeholders to urban development in Istanbul’s historic center? 2) How do mobilizations intersect with inequalities around class, gender, and ethnicity in the inner city? 3) What kinds of values are mobilized in narratives for/against urban renewal? I argue for attending to both the scale of the neighborhood and the megacity of Istanbul to engage the ongoing tensions between capitalist logics of urban neoliberalism and anticapitalist sensibilities echoing ideas of urban commons.

Taking the case study of controversial municipal and metropolitan governance of the historic peninsula of Istanbul and beyond, two initial observations have motivated this project. First, the fact that grassroots and neighborhood-based urban struggles seemed to be drawing from notions of commoning in the wake of the Gezi uprising of 2013? Second, Istanbul residents began to consider how to replicate unifying experience of Gezi Park in the context of urban renewal debates. Then what are the conditions for building alliances and allegiances across class divisions? Commoning creates “new vocabularies, social and spatial practices and repertoires of
resistance while evoking a political imaginary which can be anti (against), despite (in) and post (beyond) capitalist” (see Gibson-Graham 2006; quoted in Chatterton et al. 2013: 612).

Known as a predominantly conservative district since the 1990s, the municipal district of Fatih was controversially merged with Eminönü Municipality during the local elections of 2009 in order to “unite” the historic peninsula under an AKP-affiliated mayor when he was elected for a second term after 2004 (and a third term in 2014). With a population around 450,000, it is a mixed-class and mixed-ethnicity neighborhood with working-class and urban poor residential areas that are at risk by urban renewal, as seen in the last decade with the forced displacement of the Romani neighborhood of Sulukule (Foggo 2007) or the waterfront regeneration of neighborhoods of Fener-Balat in the previously industrial Golden Horn (Haliç) area of the historic peninsula (Bezmez 2008). Relying on personal ties and connections within the district and based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork with/among diverse research participants across three settings, the paper brings ethnographic insights to the role and relevance of class: 1) Official city assemblies of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, located in the Fatih district; 2) Grassroots urban resistance assemblies organized by the activist network of Istanbul Urban Defense (IKS); and 3) grassroots mobilizations against the old town municipality by the urban poor community of Mevlanakapi by the land walls of the historic district.

The theoretical framework is informed by the much debated concept of “right to the city” from Henri Lefebvre (1996) to David Harvey (2003) in order to reflect on hope and desire for the futures of our cities and to envision alternatives for social justice in the city. The city emerges as the site of class struggles today and Harvey (2012: 140) further elaborates “right to the city” toward an urban revolution in Rebel Cities by asking: “How, then, does one organize a city?”. He insists on the need for both the lower scale of specificity and higher scale of generality to create and sustain anti-capitalist struggle in the city. Along similar lines, I argue for a similar emphasis on combining two scales—the lower one of specificity and the higher of generality—to ground ethnographic studies of urban social movements. Urban anthropologist Ida Susser (2006) argues, following Manuel Castells’ approach in The City and the Grassroots (1983), that social movements bring transformative possibilities of a new democratic vision as well as mobilization around collective identities. However, unifying urban struggles is a problem because of the disappearance of working-class solidarities with a shrinking manufacturing sector and privatization of social provisions (see Kasmir and Carbonella 2008). The three urban commons described by Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat (2013) for transforming cities today are: 1) labor and public services as commons for a decent everyday life; 2) public space and public sphere as commons for mobility and collective use (of streets, cafés, and public gardens); and 3) art as a commons to aid urbanites to collectively envision living spaces. Departing from this typological framework on the urban commons, I consider how urban social movements of Istanbul are being

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1 “The main basis we build our efforts is actually a comprehensive social transformation project. The aim is not limited to open our historical and cultural inheritance to tourism and contribute to Fatih in terms of economy; we also aim to invigorate Fatih socially and culturally. One of the inevitable prerequisites to achieving this goal is realizing a participatory approach.” Fatih Municipality Mayor Mustafa Demir’s Message, available at http://www.fatih.bel.tr/en/content/2542/the-mayors-message/. Accessed December 18, 2015.

2 The collected data from the five-month study and its analysis does not sufficiently illuminate the axes of ethnicity and gender at this point. These will be explored further in future research.

3 These three urban commons brought together “set the conditions for a renewed right to the city in all the dimensions elaborated by Lefebvre and set the stage for social movements” (Susser and Tonnelat 2013: 108).
shaped through encounters with the three urban commons in contemporary Turkey. In conclusion, it is seen that urban social movements are results of long-term processes built on decades of urban struggles and experience, hence not restricted to the present moment.

II. FIELD ENTRY AND POSITIONALITY

This section describes my access to the field and reflections on how “native” ethnographers—just like their non-native counterparts—need to cultivate critical perspective around the “discomforts of home” in negotiating insider/outsider identities in shifting contexts. such as Teresa Caldeira (2000: 6) reflects on the persistence of displacement both as lived experience and as epistemological and critical device in her ethnography of her hometown São Paulo in City of Walls where she states: “I came to realize that as my English has an accent, so does my anthropology; it persists no matter from what perspective I look at it or in which language I write it.” In her classic essay on “native anthropologists,” Kirin Narayan (1993) notes that those who solely celebrate the privileges of being an insider fail to expose the negotiation of identity that is necessary of all anthropologists. After moving to the United States for my doctoral studies in anthropology three years ago, I returned “home” in the spring of 2015 for five months of ethnographic fieldwork in the historic peninsula or the municipal district of Fatih in Istanbul on the European side of the city.

Destabilizing the trope of traditional fieldwork by a “lone ethnographer” in exotic and remote places far from home, native ethnographies blur the boundaries between the home and the field. Despite already existing social networks of family, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors in this part of the city and beyond, my assumed “insider” status was belied on several accounts over the course of my fieldwork. My access hinged on entering unfamiliar places and relationships, ranging across three settings mentioned above: 1) official city assemblies of metropolitan Istanbul alongside municipal reporters, 2) Istanbul-wide urban resistance networks mostly tended by middle-class urbanites like myself, and finally 3) recent grassroots mobilizations by the urban poor in an inner-city neighborhood where my intermediaries were the local activists as I had limited access. I was “placed” differently in my contacts with municipal officials and city planners; urban-environmental activists and middle class residents; and with local activists and the urban poor communities who were “absent” in my field sites for the project. Navigating this complex network of relationships, I grew aware of my multiple and shifting identities as well as my own class positioning in the district.

Most propertied middle-class residents of Fatih are satisfied with increasing real estate values while the same processes threaten the inner-city urban poor, including Kurdish, Syrian, immigrant, and other disenfranchised residents in central Istanbul. A tram circles Istanbul’s historic peninsula, cutting through densely populated and multicultural neighborhood of Aksaray with its gaudy shops and one of the most diverse parts of the old city with transnational migrant communities from across the Middle East and Africa. During my fieldwork in the spring of 2015, I also realized that it serves as a spatial boundary separating the middle-class areas from the working-class or “poor” ones. The tram line came up when I met with the young local activists from Mevlanakapı who had been actively involved in organizing the only neighborhood solidarity association since the symbolic Oruç Baba Park resistance in Fatih. During an invigorated talk over black tea about their politicization after Gezi, I mentioned where I hailed from in the district: “Oh, so you grew up on the other side of the tram line. That makes sense.” It
was through this “placing” close to the end of my fieldwork that I grew aware of my new researcher identity as going “home” to conduct fieldwork. Being “placed” differently also put class perspectives into sharp relief, attesting to class as a process, not as fixed identity.

My work is informed by aligning interpretative and political economy approaches in anthropology such as Ann Kingsolver’s ethnography of her “hometown” in eastern Kentucky where she theorizes the activities of “placing” through which identities are negotiated and how people can “place” others in shifting discourses “socially, temporally, spatially, ideologically, and relationally” (1992: 128-131). Along similar lines, my interests laid in following how ordinary residents, municipal officials, reporters, city planners, and local activists made sense of legally obscure and highly contentious urban policies on the ground. Kingsolver’s notion of “placing” draws from Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff’s (1987) idea of class as process, with their focus on overdetermined contexts contrary to class analyses and relations of power that fix individuals in particular roles, attributing to them particular views (1992: 133-134). “Placing” works on several levels: it is about how research participants “place” themselves and their struggles as well as how the ethnographer-in-training was placed. Using “placing” as a critical tool for how anthropologists negotiate shifting urban contexts, I grew aware of my “outsider” status despite starting out initially as a “native.” Such categories are never clear-cut as the critical insights of feminist anthropologists show (see Jacobs-Huey 2002).

III. DATA AND METHODS

This section summarizes the methods used to collect data from three distinct (partially overlapping) settings from three groups of research participants, based on the three research questions (see Table 1 for Sampling Strategy). I will address the limitations imposed in each of the three settings in my discussion below.

Table 1. Sampling Strategy: Responses to Urban Transformations in Central Istanbul

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGENTS OF URBAN POLITICS IN FATIH DISTRICT OF ISTANBUL</th>
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<tr>
<td>15 Total</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Expert Subjects</th>
<th>Urban Activists</th>
<th>District Stakeholders</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Municipal officials</th>
<th>City Planners and Urbanists</th>
<th>Istanbul-based</th>
<th>District-based</th>
<th>Municipal and Local reporters</th>
<th>Neighborhood Residents</th>
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This project started in 2014 with three proposed cases from the municipal district of Fatih: the historic Sirkeci Train Station and two urban parks, one of which proved to be central, namely Oruç Baba Park, as the first instance of a park mobilization with popular neighborhood support. Over the course of my fieldwork these morphed into three primary sites.
My first research question addressed the disconnect in Istanbul’s urban governance, between the first-tier metropolitan planning and the antagonistic practices of second-tier district municipality against local communities in old town Istanbul, in this case the Fatih Municipality affiliated with AKP (Justice and Development Party). It would be difficult to imagine a study of urban politics without starting from the first-tier of urban political decision-making body of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Between February and May 2015, I attended the monthly official city assemblies alongside municipal reporters where many politically polarized debates took place, including the fate of the Sirkeci Train Station which narrowly escaped being transformed into a luxury hotel. I did “meeting” ethnography, including participant observation alongside municipal reporters and I conducted open-ended and semi-structured interviews with municipal reporters, municipal employees, and later on with metropolitan city officials (usually architects or city planners) in the form of informational and expert interviews. The data is in the form of detailed field notes and interview transcripts. For media and document analysis, I also collected monthly bulletins and publications of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality as well as pamphlets and official publications of the Istanbul Chamber of Urban Planners (Şehir Plancıları Odası).

The second research question, closely connected with the first, focused on the identity dimensions of grassroots mobilizations and how people were mobilized through place- or neighborhood-based identities and a broader urbanite identity. In order to see how differences played out, I followed and attended events of/by the activist network of Istanbul Urban Defense (İstanbul Kent Savunması) which started in June 2014, a year after the Gezi Park protests. Email communications and social media were also crucial to keep up with various events and groups publicized through the listserv. These activist networks are heterogeneous and usually seek to bring together participants from various social movements across Istanbul. My methods included participant observation at the activist-led Urban Resistance Assemblies (Kent Direniş Meclisi), co-organized by Istanbul Urban Defense (IKS) and Northern Forests Defense (KOS). I also attended various other events, workshops, academic conferences to understand different perspectives on urban renewal by officials, activists, planners, and residents. The data is in the form of field notes from activist and neighborhood-focused meetings, transcripts of interviews, and media accounts and representations of Istanbul’s urban renewal.

The third research question concerns possibilities and political imaginaries, especially converging around values, commons, and hope. The third site emerged slowly through my regular participation at the second site and following up on the initial cases, especially the Oruç Baba Park to reacquaint myself with the district after the Gezi protests of 2013. Initial themes here were on social and cultural sustainability with regard to urban commons. In this preliminary stage of analysis, I use the “right to the city” toward framework of David Harvey (2003, 2012). As the research is still in progress, it must be noted that addressing these deeper issues require cutting to the core of everyday politics in the public spheres of Istanbul where

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4 The currently active Istanbul Urban Defense (IKS) activist network originates from the previously formed Habitat 1996-based activist network of Istanbul Urban Movements (İstanbul Kent Hareketleri).

5 Future methods to explore social and spatial dimensions of inequality in Istanbul’s distinct neighborhoods (especially in terms of class, ethnicity, and political views), I hope to make use of visual and participatory methods (see Gubrium and Harper 2013).

6 Speaking of anthropological notion of values, David Throsby (2002) puts economic value (use value, exchange value) in contrast to noneconomic values (sociocultural values: aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic).
informal conversations and media analysis become particularly salient. The data is again in the form of field notes, transcripts, and media accounts and representations. In the next section, I present findings from each of the three settings as an attempt to response to these research questions.

IV. FINDINGS

This section is organized according to three sites and findings from each setting, also informed by my own shifting “placing” in each setting: 1) the official metropolitan city assemblies, 2) activist-led grassroots assemblies, and 3) the urban poor neighborhood of Mevlanakapı lying by the centuries-old city walls (also recognized as one of four UNESCO heritage sites in the historic peninsula) in the inner-city. The crucial question following me around in the trajectory of my fieldwork was: Where are the “people”? Not only in the official city assemblies but also at activist meetings of IKS where the absence of disenfranchised communities was noticeable. So we were mostly middle-class urban citizens of Istanbul as it was pointed out by scholar-activists, if not by the middle-class residents themselves. I will go through each research question with preliminary findings.

1. A Disconnect in Urban Governance

My first setting is the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Assemblies, which I attended alongside municipal reporters and journalists. The mass anti-government mobilizations in Gezi Park were followed six months later with massive corruption allegations in December 2013 where city politics became even more controversial. The handful of municipal reporters I hung out with at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality were almost exclusively from oppositional papers. While city assemblies are theoretically open to all urban citizens of Istanbul, the visitor balcony was populated mostly by journalists while I occasionally had to posture as an innocent student or a young reporter-in-training to pass through security.

At the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Assembly, the Group Leader of CHP (Republican People’s Party) came forward to the podium in the domed hall: “How are we supposed to read and make sense of 190 pages of a technical report in 45 minutes and formulate a decent response to propose amendments here?” The report prepared by the Construction and Public Works Commission (İmar ve Bayındırlık Komisyonu) had reached CHP representatives just before the City Assembly convened. His agitated speech was curtly interrupted after the allocated five minutes when the AKP (Justice and Development Party) Group Leader came forward to close the debates with a final remark before moving on to voting. In a slow, dry, and almost preaching tone, he concluded: “No doubt this parliament represents the people of Istanbul.” (Şüphesiz ki bu meclis İstanbul halkını temsil eder.) Long, meticulously prepared “expert” reports are assumed to be “read” and voted by the 2/3 AKP and 1/3 CHP parliamenterians in the span of a few hours every second week of month at the Istanbul

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7 Again, visual and participatory methods—which have not been employed for this particular project—offer new ways of collecting and analyzing data specific to values, emotions, and perceptions of grassroots urban movements in Istanbul, in the past and present moment.
Metropolitan Municipality, the first-tier of urban political decision-making. I was told that pro-government papers were not interested in sending their reporters anymore because they had no intention of documenting the government’s “urban crimes” (kent suçları) as one participant noted. Reflecting the enormous pressures on freedom of press existing in Turkey today, I was also told discreetly: “So are you here to study corruption? Then you’ve come to its heart.”

Whether attending the official city assemblies alongside municipal reporters or the urban resistance assemblies alongside activists and residents, there was an absence of people who had a stake in their city’s politics and political decision-making processes. Preliminary findings from the initial data analysis indicate two points. First, at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality city assemblies, pro-government parliamentarians are almost always pro-development, so voting behavior correlated highly with political party alignment. There was also a high level of political polarization and disputes concluded with 2/3 AKP (Justice and Development Party) majority votes against 1/3 CHP (Republican People’s Party). (Note that no other political parties represented at the metropolitan city assembly.) Second, there is a disconnect between the first-tier level of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality planning practices and the actual practices by district municipalities, in this case the old town municipality. In terms of the urban governance of Istanbul, while Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality is regarded as the macro planning body (as is clear from their ambitious 2015-20 Strategic Plan), current practices reflect that local and district municipalities (such as the highly controversial Fatih Municipality) make antagonizing moves in the interest of developers against (especially disenfranchised) local communities (including land walls neighborhoods such as the Mevlanakapı community).

Speaking of degenerative policy designs in the United States, Anne Larason Schneider and Helen Ingram (1997: 102) take issue with the dominant “divisive social constructions that stigmatize some potential target populations and extol the virtues of others.” Susan Prehl and Gul Tuçaltan (2009: 235) reflect on the cultures of planning in Turkey:

[T]he question is to what degree the planners and decision-making authorities use the tools to be more democratic, efficient, effective and collaborative and how? They have the laws and regulations, albeit inevitably imperfect, but the use of them is in the hands of the planners and decision-making authorities, either for the benefit of society or not.

In March 2015, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization organized a one-day panel—first of its kind—entitled “New Approaches to Urban Transformation” at Istanbul Technical University. This was an extraordinary panel because it brought together pro-urban transformation (in its widest sense because the term has become so ambiguous) academics as “expert subjects” with high-level AKP bureaucrats from the ministry and municipal governments. One co-organizer of the event, stated the two sides of the debate: those supporting urban transformation and renewal projects as a necessary tool of planning to ail depressed zones (çöküntü alanları) and protect against imminent earthquake risks in Istanbul. Those against, on the other hand, criticize the top-down instead of participatory approaches because local municipalities simply try to persuade residents to yield to the developers, resulting in the dispossession and displacement of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The bureaucrats and mayors invited to this panel introduced a “new” term to address this failure: in situ urban transformation (yerinde dönüşüm), a prime example of futile efforts among AKP ranks to contain a growing problem. While criticizing a “profit economy” (rant ekonomisi) and emphasizing participatory decision-
making at the discursive level, such “new” approaches end up serving to obscure the fact that there are always winners and losers.

2. Reclaiming the Commons: Imagining Alternatives at Urban Resistance Assemblies

While scholar-activists were involved in setting the agenda against existing urban governance mechanisms described above, they also sought to introduce new theoretical frameworks to unify struggles around ideas of commons, as it happened at the urban resistance forums of Istanbul Urban Defense (İstanbul Kent Savunması). These grassroots assemblies were co-organized with Northern Forests Defense (KOS), an environmental activist network against mega construction projects in Istanbul. Envisioned as a diverse venue to bring Istanbulites on the European and Asian sides of the city, these meetings initiated in March 2015 were intended to represent and collectivize neighborhood struggles with activists from other social movements. Staying informed and making efficient use of social media (through Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc.) was one of the priorities of these meetings. As mentioned earlier, it was brought up by activists that the real people were missing, despite a few exceptions with the representatives from working-class districts such as Gaziosmanpaşa or Fatih. The absence of working-class residents in the official assemblies and activist-led meetings was pointed out because it is one of the ongoing aims of the IKS urban network to commonify urban struggles in the city, following the experience of Gezi as it was initiated in June 2014. How can a common movement be forged across class divisions following the unifying Gezi spirit? I will discuss some examples to illustrate how markers of class differences surfaced as potential obstacles and blockages.

Since these were mostly settings for middle-class urban citizens and residents of Istanbul, it emerged that the urban poor also needed to be brought into the conversation as they continue to be stigmatized along the lines of class and ethnicity in Fatih.

In these meetings, I was “placed” as a middle-class resident of Istanbul who was also called upon to contribute by speaking from my local neighborhood in the megacity. In May 2015, at one assembly I attended with an architect friend and informant from the neighborhood. During tea break, we struck a conversation with an older gentleman from Validebağ Grove Volunteers (a group from a district on the Asian side which activists often marked as an upper-middle-class district). He mentioned his work in traditional handicrafts followed by a remark characteristic of Turkish left melancholy, in stark contrast to the purpose of the meetings: “But this is how we are—we’ve never had any solidarity.” (Biz böyleyiz İşte, bizde hiç dayanışma yoktur.) On the same day, an urban activist was making the following remarks to around sixty participants on adopting new theoretical frameworks:

> We have the experience of urban and environmental movements. The neighborhood needs to move to the public space of the park, then from there to mega projects. IKS is taking the steps for a long-term struggle. What is my common ground with the man from Kağıthane [a working-class district]?

The struggle wasn’t like this twenty five years ago. The working class itself is transforming, so we need to work closely with unions. Where the manufacturing and industry leaves, urban

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8 Urban ethnographers of New York City have documented the emergence of multiracial and multiethnic alliances in building common movements across class divisions (see Checker 2001; Sanjek 2000).

9 Syrian refugees and migrants are newcomers since 2013. Kurdish migrants from southeastern Turkey have always had enclaves in poor neighborhoods of the district, comprising a large segment of the overall population.
development and privatization enter. Now they have this notion of in situ transformation which we need to fight against. Where the capital continues to divide us, public spaces can unite.10

Going back to the urban commons typology of Susser and Tonnelat (2013), this example and others continue to illustrate a comparison of various strategies—scholar-activist and “folk” strategies—drawing from a “right to the city” or “commons” frameworks.

On 23 May, 2015, I attended a workshop organized by Sokak Bizim Derneği (Street Belongs to Us Foundation), MODE Istanbul, and Doc Next Network’s MediaLab as part of their joint project entitled “ Radical Democracy: Reclaiming the Commons.”11 The aim of their recent campaign Bi Düşün Olsun (Imagine It Into Being) which was introduced during this workshop was to directly engage the scale and the space of the mahalle (neighborhood) as the starting point for acting on ideas that can lead to meaningful action and change. Some of the questions addressed here among scholar-activists, civil society representatives, and city and regional planners were: Do we need a common language to build a common movement? How can neighborhood residents create collective or public spaces? How can civil society, expert subjects, academics, decision makers, and local governments act together to envision Istanbul? Indeed, here and elsewhere, the space of the neighborhood and the political imaginaries of Istanbul emerge as potential common grounds harnessed by activists of these urban movements to imagine alternative futures of Istanbul. These urban citizen assemblies continue every month despite difficulties in participation, coordination, and communication and misgivings about the absence of the “real” urban poor. Nonetheless, these alternative citizen assemblies aim to bring together diverse residents who would not occupy the same milieus otherwise. Despite some who may biased by their class positionality, the goal is to remain cognizant and critical of spatialization of inequality, as one research participant put it: “They don’t want us here.”12

3. Of Rubble and Trampled Lettuce: Toward a Walled-City Solidarity

My third and final case is the ongoing grassroots mobilization against Fatih Municipality’s plans for a city park project alongside the Theodosian or Land Walls.13 Speaking of public space and

10 In response to what they term the siege of Istanbul by the current urban regime under AKP government, some urban and environmental activists from IKS (Istanbul Urban Defense) and KOS (Northern Forests Defense) have offered another common ground in the notion of “life spaces” (yasam alanlari), including not only homes and neighborhoods but the environment and ecology of the megacity.

11 The website of the Turkish Sokak Bizim (Street Belongs to Us) Foundation: http://bidusun.sokakbizim.org/. The Radical Democracy: Reclaiming the Commons project (based on David Harvey’s “right to the city” framework as well as the ideas of Murray Bookchin and Henri Lefebvre) by Doc Next Network is described as: “A new project seeks to amplify the message of local struggles between citizens and urbanisation processes in Poland, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom. … The Radical Democracy: Reclaiming the Commons project tunes out the broader context of global unrest and tunes in to the local level at which the protests take place, so we may hear the common theme that binds them. That theme is citizens seeing their right to decide what kind of communities they want to live in denied by faceless processes far-removed from local reality, and certainly not accountable to it.” http://www.docnextnetwork.org/radical-democracy-reclaiming-commons/. Accessed on December 18, 2015.

12 It should be noted that tensions and struggles between local governments and disadvantaged neighborhood residents is nothing new. Following the successive waves of rural-to-urban migration to Istanbul after the 1960s, there have also been grassroots movements around squatter (gecekondu) housing in Istanbul (see Erman 2001).

13 There are eight land wall gates in total, each also corresponding to a neighborhood by the land walls: Yedikule Gate, Belgrade Gate, Silivri Gate, Mevlana Gate, Topkapi, Sulukule Gate, Edirne Gate and Eğri Gate. In the
public sphere as commons, Susser and Tonnelat (2013: 111) remark on the significance city centers and how city branding is “highly exclusive of the poor and immigrant classes, at least in its imagery.” Likewise, in Istanbul’s controversial geography of urban renewal, the “failed” experiments in neighborhoods like Sulukule, Tarlabaşı, and Ayazma show how notions of “depressed zones” (in Turkish çöküntü alanı) are deployed to stigmatize disadvantaged communities (Yalçınalı et al. 2014: 53).

Over the course of my fieldwork in the historic peninsula, I noticed continuities between Yedikule Gardens, Oruç Baba Park, and the urban poor neighborhood of Mevlanakapı, (with a population around 25.000). In the land wall neighborhoods, two significant events happened year after the Gezi Park protests, illustrating controversies of the AKP-affiliated old town municipality. First, the Oruc Baba Park movement became a symbol of resistance in this conservative district. When the park was given away to a religious foundation by the municipality, neighborhood residents, young and old, were outraged and protested to reclaim their park, aided by local activists. Second, Yedikule’s historic market gardens (in Turkish bostanlar) were planned to be replaced to build a “modern” park alongside the city walls. While some locals in the urban poor area of Silivrikapı supported the plans, six months later it was the Mevlanakapı residents who received eviction documents for repossession of their homes due to a public park project along the city walls. They organized with the support of local activists and voluntary lawyers from October 2014 until 9 August 2015 when the neighborhood association was formally legalized as SHKDD (Suriçi Halklarımın Koruma ve Dayanışma Derneği – Association for the Protection and Solidarity of Walled-City Communities). In the Mevlanakapı neighborhood, my intermediaries were the local activists who had been actively involved since the Oruc Baba Park protests which saved the neighborhood’s green space.

Moreover, the trajectory of Mevlanakapı as an inner-city neighborhood offers a glimpse into the potentialities at work in order to contest notions that the urban poor are sources of social ills or are passive subjects (see Soytemel 2013). On the contrary, urban poor communities are resilient in protecting their homes, neighborhoods, and well-being. To conclude, I will revisit an emic approach to “commoning” in the anticapitalist employment of a cultural and religious concept denoting the “rightful due” (kul hakkı) which also employed by Gaziosmanpaşa residents for

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Istanbul Historic Peninsula Site Management Plan published by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (October 2011), land walls neighborhoods are described as follows: “Some of the problems facing the neighbourhood are related to socio-economic problems due to the low-income population living in houses adjacent to the wall strip or in properties belonging to foundations, lack of documentation of archeological assets in the area and lack of prioritisation of their conservation. There are also difficulties in restoration efforts caused by periodical differences due to many previous restorations throughout history.” (p. 134)

14 As one local resident activist and local activist put it in May 2015: “Mevlanakapı started in 2002 and the neighborhood association was formalized ten days ago. Around a hundred people participate in the meetings. The neighborhood is poor but there is a concerted effort despite a lack of funds. Residents here live under hard conditions: no access to decent education nor health services. Nowadays in Fatih every public school is turned into religious schools (imam hatip). We don’t bring residents together only to debate urban renewal or to talk about how terrible AKP is. Rather, we focus on educational policies to keep people together such as our solidarity cram school (dayanışma dersanesi). Mevlanakapı also emerged from Oruc Baba Park because our neighbors were alongside us. When the local municipality donated the park to a religious foundation, a spontaneous mobilization emerged among neighborhood residents.”
similar ends) in the urban context of social and spatial inequality, as one of my participants from Mevlanakapi put it:

Elsewhere in Yedikule, people supported the municipality’s park project because they didn’t know much about the historic significance of the land walls. Security is not just about building gated communities like the Yedikule Mansions nearby. In the end, some historic market gardens (bostan) were covered with rubble by the municipality and the lettuce was trampled by riot police that summer [in the summer of 2014]. The walled city has become simply too valuable, but there’s always a bigger picture. We’re not after surplus value (artı değer) but everyone’s rightful share (kul hakkı).

VI. CONCLUSION

Thinking through what it means to “sell one’s neighbor,” this paper explored ongoing tensions between neoliberalism and the commons, in this case how to keep up urban struggles against the breaking down of social and class ties in Istanbul’s contested urban landscapes. To reiterate David Harvey’s (2003) description of the “right to the city” it is “not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image.” Along similar lines, this paper has attended to the the lower scale of specificity and emic understanding of commons couple with and higher scale of generality to collectively build and maintain anti-capitalist struggle in the city. Meanwhile, the experience of the CHESS field school also allowed me to cultivate a new self-reflexivity about how anthropologists negotiate place, identity, and power in urban political processes even as “native” ethnographers-in-training.

Whether the urban commons are construed as public services, public spaces, or creative spaces, there is consensus that a unifying common ground is necessary to building long-lasting alliances within and across urban social movements in the city (see Chatterton et al. 2013). While struggles are ongoing, looking at specific cases like the Mevlanakapi mobilization and the presence of other grassroots neighborhood groups at the urban resistance assemblies show the open-ended nature of this process, informed by the experiences of past struggles that were in place long before the Gezi experience in 2013. New vocabularies are being developed and tested among residents, activists, and scholars toward building solidarity and alliances across class divides by sharing collective spaces to talk about the present moment and future of Istanbul. This is where the specificity of neighborhoods may be understood better within the generality of urban struggles in global cities elsewhere.

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