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Who is Branding Beyoğlu? Commodification and Surveillance of Public Space in Istanbul

1 Introduction

The sense of belonging in the public space, depending on practices of inclusion and exclusion, lies at the heart of the spatial politics of Istanbul: a city divided into spaces that call for different standards of behaviour. These spaces can be central to national identification, like Taksim Square with its troubled relationship with various shades of Republican and Ottoman histories, or emerge in quotidian locations where inhabitants from all walks of life meet on busy Istiklal Street. In the urban environment, the variety of reference points, anchored to specific periods and different spaces, creates multiplicity, but not chaos. With its pluralisation of life worlds, the city acts, in the words of David Harvey, "as a theatre, a series of stages upon which individuals could work their own distinctive magic while performing a multiplicity of roles."[1] Accordingly, in Istanbul, the urban space reflects a mosaic of overlapping facets of city branding, based on historically grounded notions of individual freedom, agency, solidarity, and community.

I illustrate here the dynamics of city branding in the everyday lives of Istanbul's inhabitants. I argue that, despite constant attempts to create a widely shared city brand, it does not exist. Rather, inhabitants contribute to the various aspects of the city brand through their everyday practices, often contesting the official narratives of its urban development. At the same time, there is a powerful emphasis on the uniqueness of the city and its fundamental difference from every other city. No one living in Istanbul denies that the past of the city is constantly appropriated and manipulated for both internal and external consumers[2] and that place branding in Istanbul furthers both economic development and its residents' identification with their city.[3] However, a sense of a unified city brand remains at a superficial and clichéd level with slogans like "the meeting point of Asia and Europe."

I am interested here in city branding situated within everyday practices, with no single dominant actor in charge. I study how the image of Istanbul is a "result of various, different and often conflicting messages sent by the city and is formed in

1 Harvey, 1990: 5.

2 See also Hall, 1997.

3 See Kavaratzis, 2004.

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the mind of each individual receiver of these messages separately."[4] I emphasise the symbolic features incorporated into its city brand[5] and focus on how its competing dimensions "incite beliefs, evoke emotions, and prompt behaviours".[6] In my ethnographic case studies, authenticity is posited in relation to its various reinterpretations, urban anonymity is contrasted with powerful senses of intimacy, and expressions of individual freedom are countered with repression in the name of security. What unites these very different examples is their intimate relationship to public space.

What caught my attention early on during my ethnographic fieldwork was the remarkable ease that the inhabitants of Istanbul expressed when adapting to new situations, their detailed knowledge of how the competing aspects of the city brand were advanced and contested, and how the range of appropriate practices could be analysed. My focus here will be on diverse phenomena that illustrate the recent transformations of urban Istanbul: how public and private spaces have been reconfigured, how public space is related to the commodification and branding of the urban sphere in the district of Beyoğlu, and how the notion of "public" is reframed in encounters with state power.

The ethnographic analysis, based on 13 months of participant observation and in-depth interviews in Istanbul between 2008 and 2015, approaches public space and city branding in Istanbul from the position of everyday life, moving from appearances in the immediate environment to complex entanglements of historical narratives.[7] Together they form a sense of historical consciousness of urban space that cannot be formalised perfectly.[8] This lived embodiment of the unique but contested brand of Beyoğlu is crucial for understanding the subtle dynamics of its urban transformation. The analysis proceeds from debates around historically branded commercial appearances in Beyoğlu to how coffeehouses in the area reflect urban solidarities among their clientele and continues with questions of the surveillance and control of public space, especially in the context of Istanbul's public squares, which harness powerful political sensibilities.

4 Kavaratzis, 2004: 62.

5 See Freire, 2005.

6 Kotler and Gertner, 2011: 35.

7 This chapter is based on Chapter 8: "Morality, Public Space and Urban Transformation: New Solidarities in Beyoğlu" of my doctoral thesis (Tuominen, 2016).

8 See Faubion, 1994.

2 Public Space in Istanbul

In the social sciences, discussion of "publicness" has centred on Jürgen Habermas'[9] remarkably influential theory of the modern public sphere and its critiques or reinterpretations.[10] In the historical context of Turkey, its application poses several problems. These range from very different ideas of privacy in Ottoman times,[11] to the Republican ideologies of public space, regulated by the extremely detailed control by the state.[12] I prefer to use the term "public space" rather than "public sphere" because of the latter's close connections with specifically Western European liberal modernity, but I acknowledge the overlap between the terms.

Following Charles Taylor, my study focuses on "a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these."[13] I emphasise the lived character of public space, bringing together the historical formation of mediated encounters, civil society, and gendered space with the pragmatic realities, ongoing life, and commentary on what publicness means.[14] I argue that these quotidian practices form the sociocultural basis for the branding of the quarter.

As a theoretical or political concept, public space/sphere (*kamu alanı, kamusal alan*) was not as regularly used in public debates in Turkey at the time I began my ethnographic fieldwork in 2008 as it has increasingly been after the Gezi Park protests. However, many of its integral principles have been central to my ethnographic cases, especially those concerning boundaries regulating movement in the city and the right to occupy particular locations.[15] From the early 2000s onwards, there has been a clear and growing feeling that public space is becoming increas-

9 See Habermas, 1989.

10 See e. g. Mitchell, 1988, 2002; Taylor, 1989; Warner, 2002.

11 Detailed discussion of the Ottoman notions of public space, which were subject to profound changes at different stages of the Empire, is outside the scope of this study. Murphey suggests that the principles of Islamic law played a major role in designating the character of spaces: "Because of the strongly developed sense of social welfare expressed in concepts such as *mashala* or 'public benefit,' the spheres in which private and individual rights could prevail were strictly delimited. Nonetheless, the sanctity of those spheres was all the more jealously guarded precisely because it was so exceptional" (Murphey, 1990: 119).

12 See Altınay, 2004; Özyürek, 2006.

13 Taylor, 1992: 220.

14 See Dahlgren, 2010: 4.

15 See Low, 2000.

ingly restricted for several new reasons, not always originating from the same sources of power.

2.1 Beyoğlu and Istiklal Street: Spaces of Experimentation and Freedom

The district of Beyoğlu[16] is connected with Turkey's encounter with modernity more than any other space in Istanbul.[17] Its grand themes, as well as its ephemeral peculiarities, are aesthetically present in the environment and subject to endless debates and reinterpretations, often contrasted with the city's Historical Peninsula, across the Galata Bridge. They are reflected in contemporary Turkish literature, cinema, and fine arts and find more quotidian expressions in homes, on street corners, and at the tables of the tea and coffee houses. Yet, they refer simultaneously to political ideologies, individual desires, and senses of communal affiliations with very differently grounded connotations.

In Beyoğlu's lived environment, nostalgia for the cosmopolitan past or for the early Republican modernity coexists with traits from different eras: early Republican taverns (*meyhane*) serving fish with *rakı*, *Türkü Evi* clubs showcasing Turkish folk music often accompanied by synthesisers, and the hypermodern cinema multiplexes that have sprung up in the area. Perhaps the past of Beyoğlu is uncomplicated only in the souvenir stalls, representing reflective nostalgia that thrives in longing itself, without any serious attempt to restore past conditions.[18]

The pre-Ottoman history of Beyoğlu is scattered around the area in the form of the ruins of the old city walls and a few buildings, most notably the Galata Tower (*Galata Kulesi*), built by the Genoese colony of the area in 1348 and still the most famous landmark in the district.[19] Throughout Ottoman times, the area was mostly called Pera and was home to the Empire's non-Muslim minorities; nowadays those populations have dwindled to remnants, but their historical presence is evoked by the numerous churches of various denominations and the historical embassies of

16 Beyoğlu municipality covers Tophane and Tarlabaşı and stretches into a very wide area. However, the word Beyoğlu is also used to refer to the urban core around Istiklal Street. Also used are sometimes Taksim (referring to either the square at the end of Istiklal Street or a slightly larger area), Istiklal (referring also to its side streets), or even the old Greek name Pera (when referring to the nostalgic character of the area).

17 See e. g. Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Özyürek, 2006; Sumner-Boyd and Freely, 2000: 427–447.

18 See Boym, 2001: xviii; also Navaro-Yashin, 2009.

19 See Sumner-Boyd and Freely, 2000: 438–440.

various European nations, now reduced to consulates, as the status of embassy has been transferred to offices in Ankara.

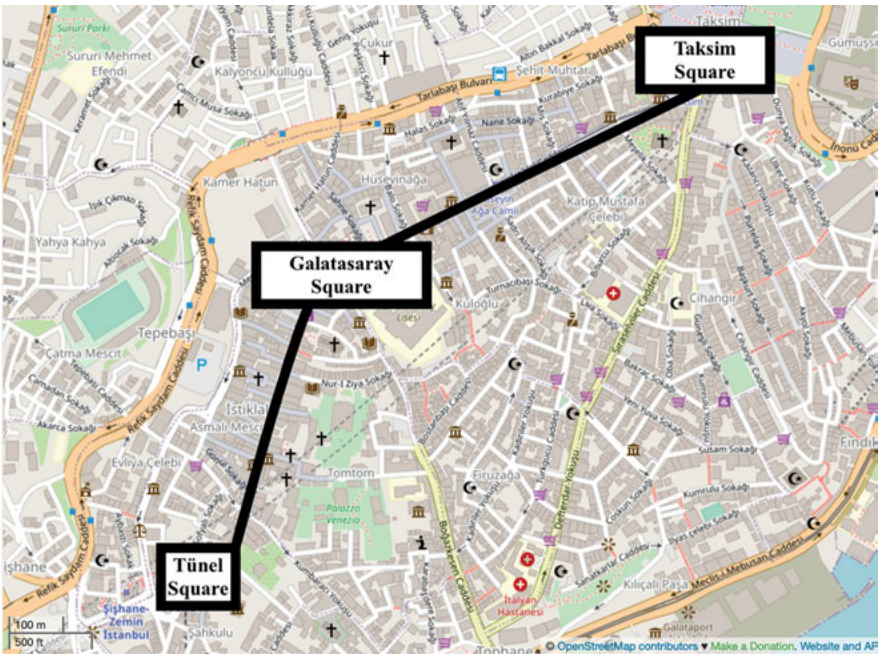

Fig. 1: Istiklal Street and its public squares
Source: OpenStreetMap. https://www.openstreetmap.org. Accessed 30 November 2021, adapted by the author.

For the whole of its history, Beyoğlu has been a space of experimentation with alien elements. There are stories of sultans visiting its taverns in disguise[20] and of Atatürk and the other Republican revolutionaries immersing themselves in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of its establishments;[21] even nowadays, it would be difficult to imagine the Gezi Park protests, uniting people from very different backgrounds, occurring in any other part of the city. At the heart of Beyoğlu lies Istiklal Street, connecting Tünel and Taksim squares (Fig. 1).

Istiklal Street is a world-famous boulevard, an egalitarian urban space, a site of self-expression, self-realisation, and tolerance, in contrast to the surrounding neighbourhoods, where people have been defined as a part of community by

20 See Boyar and Fleet, 2010: 40.
21 See Mango, 2002: 52–53.

their similarity and uniform ways of life.[22] Moreover, in Turkey there is a significant difference that makes Istiklal Street unique: "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."[23]

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 1.4 kilometres long, pedestrianised 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 Turkish tourists add to their itineraries when visiting Istanbul.

The immediate perception of Istiklal Street is that it is relatively orderly and uniform. Along its course, the ground-floor establishments consist predominantly of large international chain stores such as Nike or Levi's, alongside coffeehouses and both multinational and Turkish restaurants. This is Istiklal Street in its quintessential form, attracting all kinds of people to spend money or just to stroll 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 snow storm 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 organisation of its more detailed contours is easily lost amidst the dominant currents. At the same time, many of the significant contestations of today draw heavily on its brand of urbanity and take place in the quotidian sphere of the street.

2.2 Branding Simit Carts and Shop Signs in Beyoğlu

The commodification of the famous *simit* bagel tells a detailed story of the historically changing geography and the reconfiguration of boundaries in Beyoğlu. The well-known *simit* carts, selling fresh bagels cheaply to passers-by, have been subject to regulations about their appearance, in a way that reflects the wider trends of urban development. For many Istanbulites, these were not trivial matters, but

22 See Özyürek, 2006: 76; Robins and Aksoy, 1995: 229.
23 Özgüven, quoted in Tanju, 2008: 156.

integral features of Beyoğlu's urbanity, ways to establish intimate connections with specific spaces and to engage with practices of city branding.

The comparison of different bakeries and the perfect consistency of their products, the crunch and freshness of the bagel, usually served plain, is one of the definitive Istanbul experiences, something that can be elaborated to great heights. Many *simit* salesmen were also distinctive personalities who got to know their customers across class boundaries and provided news and gossip of the area. The encounters were usually brief but became meaningful when repeated over the years, in some cases decades.

At first glance, the most recent transformation of Beyoğlu is apparent in the large-scale renovation of the buildings lining Istiklal Street and the march of international retail chains. However, on closer examination, there are other forces at work in the change of its historically defined ambience. The local municipality has been active in initiating new policies to make it a distinctive and positively perceived brand referring to their depiction of the "golden age" of Beyoğlu. In the beginning of the 2000s, the *simit* carts were redesigned to fit into the widely recognised nostalgic image of the street (Fig. 2), and all the stores were instructed to change their signs to ones with brass lettering on a wooden background, following the style of many of the older establishments (Fig. 3).[24] This practice of city branding, again, was deeply ingrained with history.

The glorious Istiklal Street of the post-war era had been lost in the 1980s and the early 1990s to an environment plagued by derelicts and drug addicts, with many businesses leaving the area.[25] The aesthetic interventions that followed were part of "The Beautiful Beyoğlu Project" (*Güzel Beyoğlu Projesi*), initiated to bring back the former glory of the area.[26] It is noteworthy that the 1980s, generally depicted as the rebirth of a more open, international, and liberal Turkey, were experienced in Beyoğlu as the loss of its status as the apex of modernity and urbanity.

When discussing the uniform appearance of the carts, the *simit* vendors were initially cautious with their choice of words and spoke of the changes as "signs of the times," but after some encouragement, unvaryingly expressed offence at the intrusion and the regulation of something that they had established and developed and had now become homogeneous and regulated. Of course, many of the younger ones had only worked with the new carts, but they also acknowledged the change, as it reflected the wider considerations of the cityscape and the role of the *simit*

24 See Ertep, 2009; Esen, 2008: 267.

25 See Ertep, 2009.

26 See Adanalı, 2011.

Fig. 2: The uniform appearance of the simit carts reflects the desired historical markers of the municipal beautification project
Photo: Ayşe Erek, 2022. Courtesy of the photographer.

vendors as unique individuals, commentators on the neighbourhood's news and broader issues concerning Turkey and the world.

Ümit[27] had been working for decades close to Galatasaray Square, halfway between Taksim and Tünel Squares, and was renting out his *simit* cart to his brother's grandson more often, blaming his old age and frail health, especially on hot summer days. He was very proud of his personal history in connection with Istanbul's changes and explained in detail how he had seen several demonstrations around the square, many of them culminating in violence, and the character of the area changing into a rundown and even dangerous enclave before it started

27 The names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people appearing in the text.

Fig. 3: Some multinational chains have adopted the classic presentation of brass lettering on a wooden surface
Photo: Pekka Tuominen, 2014.

to attract masses of people again. Back then, he said, you would not see families strolling in the street; and especially in the evenings, the space was exclusively male, except for the prostitutes. Following the populist narrative of failures in Turkish modernity, he, as a born Istanbulite, associated the deterioration of Beyoğlu with the influx of Anatolian migrants, bringing *arabesk* culture to the area with dreadful consequences. Now, according to him, the area had become "cultured" (*kültürlü*) again, and people were behaving in a more sophisticated manner.

The commodification of the desired historical elements in Beyoğlu reflected a widely acknowledged hierarchy of modernisation in a double sense, from above and below,[28] alternating between the Republican and populist registers. The top-down modernisation of public space in the years of the early Republic is still visible in the street and square names: *İstiklâl* (Independence), *Meşrutiyet* (Constitution) and *Tünel* (Tunnel – from the world's third oldest subterranean urban rail line, connecting the square with the northern shore of the Golden Horn), and its populist modernity is associated with the informal *arabesk* culture of the

28 See Hebbert, 2005.

area. Now the commodification and branding strategies selectively associate the hypermodern centre of shopping malls as well as the modest *simit* carts with the nostalgic past of Republican modernity.

In the locally framed context, the diverse designs of the carts, still found in other areas of Istanbul, were seen as a distraction from the uniform image of the nostalgic depiction. The same applies to the regulations on the shop signs. It seemed that the regulation of wood-and-brass signs applied only to companies that are somehow connected to Turkey or the supposed spirit of the street. Later, the international brands were allowed to have their own signs with no clear rules, and many of the global Turkish brands, not specifically associated with the nostalgic spirit of Beyoğlu, also operated without restriction. The seemingly innocent rebranding of the district, based on the nostalgic images of its past, brought to mind the freedom of its past, with its famous cultural figures and intelligentsia. However, this commodification of public space was not restricted to appearances, but also affected the everyday practices of the inhabitants.

2.3 Coffeehouse Solidarities

Istiklal Street, all the way from Tünel to Taksim Square, has no public benches. The nearest ones are at Gezi Park, which was an insignificant and abandoned place[29] behind Taksim Square when I began my fieldwork, with just a few lonely characters spending their days in the grey park. For a place to sit down for free, one could go down the hill to the seafront of Karaköy, to the squares of the Historical Peninsula, or alternatively to Kadıköy, a substantial urban centre on the Asian side of Istanbul. In the Istiklal area, you either paid for a seat in a commercial establishment or occupied a street corner.[30] This left people to choose between various teahouses, cafes, bars, and restaurants or just to walk around, stopping on street corners; the preferences here varied considerably, related to degrees of publicness of space, access, and desired activities. Many were semi-public spaces that played an important role in establishing social links.

29 In light of more recent events, the isolation of Gezi Park might seem odd. It was, nonetheless, confirmed to me in many occasions. The park carried next to no connotations before it became a focus of the massive protest movement.

30 Interesting exceptions to this pattern were some staircases where people would congregate to sit. At the time of my fieldwork, the one behind Galatasaray Lycée attracted a slightly sinister crowd, with some groups sniffing glue. The other famous one, in the middle of the Cihangir neighbourhood with a beautiful view of the sea from the hill, pulled a crowd of people drinking beer and wine bought from the shops nearby.

I found it interesting how people in Beyoğlu would discuss their choice of a teahouse or a coffee bar at length, employing ideas of sociality and solidarity in addition to the looks of the place and the quality of its products. These questions lie at the heart of branding the district. In these descriptions, notions of urbanity, class, and differently framed senses of belonging distinguished Beyoğlu from the other districts of Istanbul. The variety of establishments corresponded to the variety of people found in the area, a microcosm of Turkey's social relations.

The establishments were also ordered spatially – many cafes along Istiklal Street were decorated in the classic French style, reminiscent of the Golden Age of the cosmopolitan urbanity of the area, but they were rapidly giving way to multinational coffee chains and fast-food joints. To supplement these, there were a few simple teahouses that catered mostly to people who wanted to sit down for a quick glass of tea on their way somewhere else. In the side streets, the situation changed considerably; the number of multinational franchises diminished radically, and the cafes and bars expressed much wider variety in narrow but busy streets, with many of the establishments tucked into the upper floors of the buildings and extending to their roof terraces. This classification provided a framework for understanding how the image of Beyoğlu, a cherished mosaic of variable senses of belonging, was built in an environment where truly public space was not a permanent condition.

In addition to tea and coffee, the establishments provided various encounters that corresponded to the brand of the district in different ways. Although the brand of Beyoğlu, visible in the ubiquitous representations of artistry and experimentation, celebrated the trajectory of tolerance in the district, encounters with others were often marked by suspicion. The globally familiar coffeehouse and restaurant chains lining Istiklal Street offered a sense of anonymity and much of the clientele consisted of irregular visitors and tourists. Sometimes the anonymity could be made to serve a purpose; many wanted to have a snack or a drink with minimal social interaction and these places were perfect for that.

At the other extreme, there were places where entry was restricted, although not in an explicit manner. The restrictions were internalised and rarely challenged because people did not want to push the boundaries. The question had much more to do with nuances of recognition and acceptance: the degree to which places were welcoming played a huge role. At the same time, the city was seductive in the possibilities it offered to establish a wide range of contacts in different spaces.

Most of the teahouses (*çay evi, çay bahçesi*), reading cafes (*kıraathane*), modest cafes (*kahve*), and European-style cafes (*cafe*) had strong connotations with different senses of sociality, intimately interwoven with the notions of modernity and publicness in Beyoğlu, forming spaces within the area that connected – as well as excluded – people in various ways. Here, it is important to remember the excep-

tional quality of the urban sphere of Beyoğlu as a melting pot and a meeting point; there are, of course, cafes and teahouses all over Istanbul. However, in most of the neighbourhoods they retain a very private character and are only extremely rarely visited by people who are not part of the daily clientele.

If Şivan, a friend of mine living in the rundown Tarlabaşı district, just five minutes' walk from Istiklal Street, was not spending his evenings in the Istiklal area, he went to play *tavla*[31] in the Özdemir *kıraathanesi* in his neighbourhood. He often told me that the place reminded him of his childhood in Mardin, a city in the Southeast of Turkey, where he had spent his childhood before moving to Istanbul ten years ago. The place was filled with people from the immediate area, all of them male, some playing games and others reading newspapers. At first, I felt somewhat hesitant to enter this place, almost next door to where I lived, and wanted to have Şivan accompany me.

He seemed to know everyone present and wanted me to shake hands with them on our first visit. That was enough to make me welcome in a space that had felt extremely private before. It was frequented mostly by Kurds and acted as an extension to their homes, with the same faces at their regular tables every day. Şivan joked to me that everybody also came to read the papers in the daytime during the Ramadan fast, even though tea was not served, a fact that I had encountered in teahouses during my earlier trips to rural Turkey. Now cigarette smoke filled the air and people were discussing politics and the latest gossip freely across the tables. This was the perfect combination of hominess and acceptance for a neighbourhood cafe. However, for the clientele, this was not what Beyoğlu stood for. The establishments around Istiklal Street represented different kinds of solidarities.

Another friend of mine, Ozan, was a true connoisseur of cafe culture of Istanbul. He was employed in a gallery exhibiting the work of Turkey's upcoming artists and often worked remotely on his laptop in the coffeehouses nearby. For him, Beyoğlu's cafes were a unique phenomenon, something that he had not come across elsewhere. The finely tuned distinctions were important: he loathed the coffee chains lining Istiklal Street and preferred *kahves*. This is a general name for modest coffeehouses, known for their informal atmosphere and sometimes heated debates on politics and other matters. There were several of them in the side streets of Istiklal, and he liked to alternate between a couple of favourites.

When I joined him, I entered an atmosphere resembling Habermas' definition of the public sphere[32] in the early 18th century, transposed into present-day Istan-

31 A game very similar to backgammon.

32 See Habermas, 1989.

bul. Our *kahve* attracted a wide variety of people: men and women; construction workers on a coffee break; retired academics who spent most of their days around the same table; students preparing for exams; and people working in media industries. No one was obliged to take part in discussion – some concentrated on their books, and some just smoked cigarettes and listened to the others. The discussions did not centre on one topic, but flowed from one to another with constantly changing groups of participants. This was the most authentic pocket in Istanbul's urbanity that Ozan cherished the most: he said with pride that it was only here that you could meet people from all walks of life in an atmosphere of mutual respect. For him, it represented a brand of urban life that was nowadays under threat from the homogeneous coffeehouse chains. After my first visit, I asked Şivan about this *kahve*; he said that it was a good place; he would sometimes stop by, but he felt too shy to talk with all the educated people around.

The publicness of cafes and teahouses was a highly valued characteristic, especially for those who lived in cramped conditions with extended families, sometimes felt suffocated by the watchful atmosphere of their neighbourhoods, and wanted to enjoy the freedom offered by Beyoğlu. In addition, these places provided opportunities to test the boundaries of conservative culture and to try out new ways to participate in urbanity and modernity. I regard crossing boundaries and testing the degrees of access as intimately associated with reproducing the specific brand of Beyoğlu's urbanity in significant ways through everyday practices. However, consumption is just one variant of sociality. With the lack of a truly public space, squares have become extremely important and resonate with the central questions of publicness and participation.

3 City Squares of Beyoğlu

Boulevards and squares lie at the heart of urbanity and are in many cities distinctive elements of their brand. Open boulevards have been seen as moral projects from the times of Baron von Haussmann, who sought to eliminate the filth and the squalor of the inaccessible slums of 19th-century Paris,[33] but also as urban places where various elements of society can mix freely. In turn, squares have even stronger connotations of political action, often related to their specific histories. Especially in the case of political protests, these meanings are embodied in the space

33 See Mitchell, 1988: 65.

itself, placing demands on the symbolic centres of society and capturing greater national attention.[34]

The concept of the square was very different in the Ottoman city from its modern sense. The spaces where public and private would intersect were not emphasised in the architecture of the times; open spaces, if they existed, were used for pitching tents or for sports.[35] The large public squares in Turkey are a specifically modern phenomenon with strong connections to Republican history. They are also intimately tied to the international developments of the times; the opening of large spaces in the master plan of Henri Prost, an enormous project initiated by an invitation from Atatürk in 1936 and implemented beginning in 1939, was in line with the modernist planning principles of the times – the ideas of conserving the vernacular heritage were not valued, not just in Turkey, but also more widely.[36] Prost saw the future of Istanbul as "a city of public squares."[37]

Like boulevards, the squares also act as catalysts for establishing solidarities: people who would otherwise have little to do with each other, and whose encounters are limited to short exchanges, have found common points of interest by participating in politics in the shared space of a square. In Beyoğlu, Taksim Square is the apex of the politicised spaces in Turkey, intensifying the questions of freedom, liberalism, and democracy, but there are other squares along Istiklal Street that present different constellations.

3.1 Street Corner Life and Demonstrations at Galatasaray Square

The events that sometimes explode in Taksim Square are repeated on a smaller scale on Galatasaray Square. Taking its name from *Galatasaray Lycée*, a revered institution that has played a crucial role in educating many of Turkey's intellectuals and political leaders,[38] its massive gates still dominate the location and create a discernible ambience. It is no wonder that Ümit, selling *simit* bagels outside the gates, portrayed his location as the best to observe all kinds of changes in Beyoğlu. The Square is a location to arrange meetings and to find a quick snack around the clock, but also a space for political action.

34 See Low, 2000: 184.
35 See Goodwin, 1998: 111.
36 See Gül, 2006: 174.
37 Yıldırım, 2012: 1.
38 See Sumner-Boyd and Freely, 2000: 431.

Most of the activities have only a few participants, reflecting a wide spectrum of political actors: alongside the LGBTQ+, animal rights, and environmental protection activists, the trade unions and small leftist parties are often present in the almost daily demonstrations. Sometimes the political events of the day spontaneously bring people from different groups to the Square to protest or to celebrate.

Galatasaray Square has no public benches, and the nearby cafes also work chiefly as takeaways. As a result, most of the people stand around in groups, lean against the walls, or sit on the ground. The atmosphere is generally very relaxed and informal, with a diverse mix of people. This was where I often came to spend time with Şivan. He and his friends frequented a street corner next to a small grocery store (*bakkal*) close to the square. The group did not have a precise composition; people would come, say hello to others, and take part in the current discussions; some would buy a small glass of tea from a vendor nearby, often to drink it standing, and continue somewhere else, only to come back soon to repeat the pattern. Most of the participants were males between twenty and thirty years of age, but often their friends and relatives, or women married to or dating the regulars, would stop by, exchange the latest gossip, and move on.

They described this activity using spatially defined terms that separated Beyoğlu from their home neighbourhoods. It was referred to as going to Istiklal or Taksim; many evenings consisted of wandering around the area, with the *bakkal* as the focal point. Şivan styled this as life in Beyoğlu, a quintessentially urban way to spend time for those who claimed the area as theirs. Şivan and his friends distinguished themselves from tourists and casual visitors in harsh terms. According to them, these would walk Istiklal Street from one end to another like a flock of sheep, with their mouths open in amazement. Here, the criterion was streetwise knowledge, shared by people from all social classes, but not tied to class. It was a specific quality possessed by the Istanbulites who spent their time on the streets in constant interaction with very different people.

Most of Şivan's friends originated from remote villages in the Southeast: many of them had a poor command of formal Turkish and no foundation in the sophisticated manners conventionally associated with modern life in metropolitan centres. Nonetheless, they felt at home in the area and explicitly claimed to belong to Beyoğlu just as much as anyone else. In addition, in a manner reminiscent of the higher-class urbanites, they shared the pride in having in-depth knowledge of the city and situated their discussions in very familiar sociopolitical frameworks, the dynamics that have animated discussions of modernity and urbanity in Istanbul for over a century.

In addition to being a conventional place to hang around, Galatasaray Square functions as a scene for encounters between the police and people who want to raise awareness of political issues. Many of the battles concerning the brand of

Beyoğlu are conducted in front of the people passing by. In the street protests, the presence of the state is always overpowering; the police wear helmets and carry shields and automatic weapons, with intervention vehicles equipped with water cannon in the immediate vicinity.

Sometimes this led to comical situations. Şivan told me that he had witnessed a demonstration on behalf of the rights of the blind on the Square some time ago. There had been a group of protesters, mostly blind and elderly, carrying white canes, distributing leaflets and occupying the square in very small numbers. All the same, in front of the giant doors of *Galatasaray Lycée*, they were met by the police in full riot gear. Şivan said that he felt that even some of the police officers were rather ashamed of the situation. Unsurprisingly, sympathy had turned to the side of the blind.

The frequent protests around Galatasaray Square uphold the tradition of free expression associated with the image of Beyoğlu. If many of the commercial appearances in Istiklal Street are controlled by the municipality and the negotiation of the image of Beyoğlu often happens through the choice of an establishment to eat or drink in, Galatasaray Square acts as a public space for citizens to point out their concerns – or to take part in its specific urbanity by frequenting the street corners. However, at this level, the liberal image of Beyoğlu often comes into direct confrontation with state power, and the protests often seem like showcases of the state forces. It is also possible that the citizens' selective history of the image of Beyoğlu comes into open conflict with the one proposed by the state. The exemplary case of this is the yearly May Day protests on Taksim Square.

3.2 Contestation over Taksim Square

The yearly event of May Day radically transforms the urban space of Beyoğlu and is especially interesting in how it deviates from everyday life and demonstrates cracks in the order of symbolic spaces, which normally reproduce and enforce widely shared stereotypes. In Istanbul, May Day has strong connotations of what is referred to as the Taksim Square Massacre of 1977. The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (*Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, DİSK) had organised the first big rally on Taksim Square in 1976, and the bloody events of the following year were anticipated in Turkey amidst violent confrontations along politically divided lines, culminating in the military coup of 1980. It is still uncertain who opened fire from the roof of the Intercontinental Hotel, now called Marmara,

killing four people and resulting in a chaos that caused the death of 34 people and injured hundreds.[39]

Here, I will focus on how the present-day protests reflect the qualities associated with Beyoğlu and manage to create solidarities among people from different backgrounds; I consider the May Day protests as extracting material from historical events and using their significance creatively in the yearly reproduction of ephemeral solidarities. The rhythms of the May Day activities redraw the boundaries of the city in unusual ways and provide an outlet to express tensions in public space, especially in relation to Beyoğlu's most politicised sites.

At the time of my fieldwork, there was nervous expectation of what was going to happen: May Day had been declared a holiday in April but people had not been allowed to gather on Taksim Square in 2008, the year before. Now various leftist parties had received permission for 5,000 people to march into the square under heavy police presence.[40] In local *bakkals*, cafes, and teahouses, there was a fair amount of speculation on the security situation: how the security forces would be positioned and whether people would be allowed to enter Istiklal Street or Taksim Square freely. The preparations were already underway with increased police presence in the streets, and people were discussing the different signals in the cityscape.

While much of the speculation was done in a curious, even joking manner, there were instances that portrayed more serious tensions over the spatial order of Beyoğlu. Ridvan, a young waiter and a grocery store worker living close to Şivan in Tarlabaşı, came to visit me, furious at what had happened to him two days before May Day. As usual, he had been spending time with his friends around Taksim Square, when a policeman had approached them. The officer had told the group of five to go back to Tarlabaşı.[41] I could not be sure if this was just a way to offend them by designating their place in a derogatory way, but in this case the words had really hit home. He told me that one of his friends had argued for their right to be in the public space of the square as citizens (*vatandaş*) and this had led to policeman slapping him, arresting the whole group, and taking them to be verbally disciplined beside the nearby police van.

The message from the police had been that they were prohibited from being near the square on May Day and should do their rioting in their own neighbourhood. It was hard to establish which was more offensive to him: depriving him of his right as a Turkish citizen to be in a public space or alienating him from urban

39 See Baykan and Hatuka, 2010.

40 See Timur, 2009.

41 See also Secor, 2004: 358 on regular ID checks on Taksim.

space by suggesting he should instead cause trouble in his own neighbourhood, a space that the police would not be interested in. His version of what had happened fluctuated between contempt for the state that would discriminate against the poor and the Kurds, and pride in supporting himself financially and contributing to Turkish society with his store and his job as a waiter. The recurring confrontations with the police seemed like repetitions of the same pattern; constant regulatory work to remind the undesirable elements of their place in the supposed freedom of Beyoğlu.

May Day brought numerous policemen who seemed bored patrolling the street on a hot day in full riot gear. Again, it felt like a staged drama: the police cordons encircled the symbolically significant spaces of Istiklal Street and Taksim Square to protect them from undesirable elements. This was the performance of upholding the desired brand of Beyoğlu in changing times. The intrusion of dangerous people causing mayhem in the city centre was not specified, but followed the familiar spatial logic of the egalitarian centre of Beyoğlu belonging to responsible citizens and their incommensurability with inner-city populations, who could be controlled only by the strong state. The annual drama seemed to yield the same results and remind the people of the boundaries in the area.

4 Conclusion

The ethnographic vignettes above point to transformations of public and private spaces at very different scales. They point to the serious work of redetermining one's place in Beyoğlu through Low's categories of access, freedom of action, taking over space, ability to modify the environment, and ownership of public space.[42] In Istanbul, the definition of "public" resides within a rich semantic network, consisting of several oppositions and complementary relations with concepts such as "privacy, secrecy, domesticity, isolation, individualism, sectarianism, market, state,"[43] all built on top of earlier historical formations.

I maintain that different definitions of publicness play a very significant role in the geographical, conceptual, and symbolic reworking of the urban topography of present-day Istanbul. Beyoğlu's specific brand of urbanity consists in following complex historical trajectories, with their contested emphases and disguised meanings. The brand of the district is constantly reworked and transformed with no sin-

42 See Low, 2002.

43 Starrett, 2008: 1036.

gle dominant actor in charge. The resulting actions range from the choice of a particular typeface to large-scale police interventions; both can yield powerful results.

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