

Modernity vs. Modernism in Istanbul: the Culture of Rupture and the State of Exception

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Abstract.

The modernity concept originated in western theoretical/philosophical thought. Characterised by secular, scientific, social and economic developments, it significantly affected arts and architecture. Modernism, its 20th century cultural outcome, was heterogeneous in nature and commonly related to local progress and technique.

The Modern Project came in many forms and with multi-layered meanings. We unfold insights on possible Asian identifications through the inquiry of the self-imposed modernisation strategy of Turkey. The recent history of Turkey, for centuries a geographical and intellectual bridge between East and West, sheds new light on the interpretation and incorporation of modern principles and their cultural outcomes in Asian countries.

We select Gezi Park and the protests (Taksim Square) as the main case to look into modernity in Turkey. The protests were a reaction to the rapid urban transformation of recent times in Istanbul. This transformation, mainly led by individual interventions by the Prime Minister (PM), is not the first in history. Istanbul of the 1950s has witnessed similar ways of operation, which changed the city and the public spaces radically. Tracing from the most recent to the farther, two contemporary intellectuals are proposed, at the one hand Frederic Jameson to question modernity and modernism and at the other hand Giorgio Agamben to look into the idea of the state of exception. With 'paradigmatic issues' as capitalism, criticism, freedom, the period and the break, modern(ist) characteristics in the society of Turkey today are brought to the surface.

Particularities of regional discourses on modernity and their modernist productions must be examined within a broader theoretical scope in order to unravel cultural specificities and universalities on the subject. We try to avoid a categorical look at the history of modernity, which separates modernity as a completely western thought and its implementations in other contexts as the followers of this thought.

Key words.

modernity, modernism, 'culture-of-rupture', 'state-of-exception', criticism, *espace-libre*, Istanbul

1. Modernity in Turkey: a Status Questionis

İlhan Tekeli characterises modernity in Turkey as follows:

Modernisation in the Republican Period is responding to people's needs in guidance of science and technical knowledge, and in a planned manner. Modernism meant building the nation identity, the industrialisation of the country and creating modern cities all around Turkey. Cities are the places of modernity.¹

Istanbul is a city 'on the break' of Europe and Asia, thus, the geographical and intellectual East-West bridge. We approach Istanbul as a touchstone of modernity in Turkey.

The self-imposed modernisation strategy of Turkey over time, which culminates today in an array of unpredictable elements, can inform us about the interpretation of and adaptation to modern/modernist principles and their outcomes in a non-western context. The 'situatedness' of the modernity paradigm in Turkey's recent history is questioned by examining some of its 'spatial manifestations'.

Two decisive political events are brought to the surface. Individual interventions under Prime Minister (PM) Erdogan (2004-2012) led to the protests in Gezi Park and on Taksim square (**Fig.1**): a reaction to rapid urban transformations in Istanbul. Secondly, PM Menderes' term and his interventions (1950-1958), which made Istanbul 'explode'.

Two contemporary intellectuals are proposed for a combined reading/re-framing of both periods. For contemporary insights on modernity and modernism we reckon with Frederic Jameson.² Furthermore, we project Giorgio Agamben with his 'State of Exception' (2005) on political mechanisms and their urban consequences.³

Both 'political events' and their public/spatial exemplifications are examined. Starting from Occupy Gezi we go backwards in time, ending in the fifties.⁴ The narrative is being told from the present to the past; throughout this narrative, a plot on modernity/modernism is elaborated. The protests are an inspiration to develop a different perspective for tracing back 'modern history' starting from 'the now'.⁵

2. Politics and People: Periods of States of Exception

Jameson suggests the trope of modernity is a rewriting and displacement of previous narrative paradigms.⁶ In 'A Singular Modernity', he elaborates on the issue of periodization using four maxims of modernity; 'We cannot not periodize' and 'Modernity is not a concept but rather a narrative category' are maxim one and two.⁷ To mark and analyse both political events in our narrative, we propose the ideas of 'break' and 'period'. We acknowledge Jameson's dialectics of breaks and periods - where break can become period - which result in dialectics of continuity and rupture.⁸

The essential paradox of modernity is that it advances both freedom and criticality.⁹ These characteristics are shown in the claiming of existential rights. Writer Octavio Paz says on the subject:

Critical reason [...] accentuates temporality. Nothing is permanent; reason becomes identified with change and otherness. We are ruled not by identity [...] but by otherness and contradiction [...] In the past the goal of criticism was truth; in the modern age truth is criticism. Not an eternal truth, but the truth of change.¹⁰

This tension between criticism and commitment remains essential to relate to the modern; the discrepancy between outward conditions of life and one's inner sensibility infuses public reaction.¹¹ Today in Turkey, discontinuity is in play and breaks are tangible. Individual experiences 'in the maelstrom' are related to the constraints of democracy, the autocratic and the violent.¹² Elements of transition are apparent in the criticism and resistance expressed on Taksim Square and in Gezi Park. Public oppositions rise as counteracts to individual political interventions materialised in bureaucratic instruments, laws, departments, etc.

Gezi Park, built by pulling down Ottoman barracks, was a result of modernist actions (1920s) and characterised by modernist principles. More than its design, the underlying ideas of public space represented the Republic's ideology. (**Fig.2**) In June 2013, 'capitalist modern' thinking was displayed by the proposal for a 'barracks-style' shopping mall on Gezi Park. The Park has befallen into 'a situation of exception', where ambiguous grounds are State produced. The citizens/civil society cannot act since the law stopped functioning regularly without clarity on its new functioning.

Carl Schmitt explains this state of exception by underlining the precondition of a sovereign authority for a functioning legal order.¹³ The sovereign (who is outside the law) is whoever able to decide on 'the state of exception', guaranteeing its validity.¹⁴ If there is a continuous state of emergency, the law is continuously suspended, and the law, hence the sovereignty, is sustained.¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben constructs his argument on Schmitt's theory, but contrary to Schmitt, he suggests that the state of exception is where the insider/outsider positions get blurry and become indistinguishable.¹⁶ Derek Gregory sees the space of exception as a potential space of political modernity rather than as paradigmatic, and that resistance, even bio-political modes of resistance, is possible.¹⁷

Modernity, between WWII and the 1960s, meant that 'the old' had to be demolished and great infrastructural investments had to compose the backbone. PM Menderes was the protagonist ordering 'exceptional' interventions and planning decisions in the public realm.¹⁸ The Karaköy, Eminönü, Beyazıt and Aksaray squares were planned and refurbished in a radical way.¹⁹ The new legacy in Turkey was established in 1958 with the founding of the Istanbul Public Works and Settlement Department. These interventions were perfect examples of states of exception.

3. Modernity and Modernism: from Project to Space

The paradigms of modernity/modernism/modernisation are ever evolving strains of western thought. Definitions are heterogeneous and arguments for their linkage in between often arbitrary. In a 2011 publication on the subject, Detlef Mertins writes:

Modernity designates what is distinct about a specific moment in time whose duration [...] may vary from a sunset to a century. *Modernisation* [...] refers to transformations of materialist civilisation [...] In contrast to both, *modernism* may be thought of as the cultural response to modernity and modernisation [...]²⁰

Modernity is bound to ‘time’ – we talked about ‘the period’ earlier – but also to ‘place’: both are distinct parameters to measure society.²¹ ‘The urban space’ is an exemplary construct of the modern, manifested by the political/the public. Through imperialism, colonialism, globalisation or ‘democratic adaptation’, diasporic identities of modernity were carried out. Habermas observed that modernity cannot follow models from another epoch, it has to create its normativity out of itself.²²

Tekeli considers modernity a bottom-up transformation process in Europe, whereas in Turkey, modernity started as a top-down project. This was problematic: modernist ideology was perceived as western, self-criticism appeared difficult, etc.²³ What we witness in Istanbul today, is non-western but equally of a modern authenticity. The subversive actions and the persistence of occupying public space are emblematic of the urge for freedom and democracy.

It all started one night in June 2013. People saw a tree being ripped out of the ground in Gezi Park. Ambivalent plans for the demolition of the park and the Atatürk Cultural Center (**Fig.3**) already had been revealed: a shopping mall, an office tower, a mosque, a baroque style cultural center were only some of the ideas declared by the PM. The court was rejecting these applications for transformation consistently... A group was formed in front of the tree, and that’s where it took off... The park occupation continued for a long time before it was cleared by the police. They didn’t let people in again, but neither did further interventions in the park occur.

In the 1930s, the State perceived urbanisation processes as a societal transformation mechanism. Kirdar, Istanbul’s governor in the late 1930s-1940s, defined urban planning as transforming the pearl of nature (Istanbul) to the clean, civilised and aesthetical.²⁴ At that time, Henri Prost introduced the concept of *espace libre* in Istanbul’s planning.²⁵

L’espace libre was one of the main elements of *Musée social*’s approach on cities. Prost’s plans for Istanbul were parallel to the principles of *Musée social* for Paris and to those of contemporaries in CIAM.²⁶ Parks, squares, public open spaces,

promenades and boulevards were included in this concept; two parks in Bayrampaşa and Gezi and the Archaeology Park were key elements.²⁷ Prost's 'beautification' of Istanbul shows itself in these free spaces, where aesthetics is combined with modern state ideology.

Les espaces libres - Gezi Park is one of the 18 parks - were closely connected to the secular reforms of the modern state of Turkey.²⁸ The designs of these spaces were highly elaborated. Prost was criticised for not being 'ideologically modern' and not being a planner but being aesthetically driven instead. Mostly oriented on hygiene and zoning principles, he also focused on societal aspects, for instance on women being in public spaces. (Fig.4) Later on in the Menderes period, more open spaces were created by pulling down historical buildings arbitrarily. Beyazıt square in the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul is an example of this: planned and started to be built by the PM's interventions, then by architects, but never completed. It was planned as a circulation and connection place but without the principles of a public space.

Occupy Gezi in June 2013 was a clear representation of what open/free spaces can mean to a public, a commons is created to collect people. People gather to see each other, touch each other, and be aware of themselves, their power, their dimension, both physically and socially, but also politically. This authenticity of Gezi and the protests on it, deliver a modernity history for Istanbul. The notion of *espace libre* hosts the conflict about the intended shopping mall and the citizens' broader demands.

4. Concluding Questions^{29 30}

Jameson sees modernity discourses as essential ways of talking about capitalism.³¹ He regards modernism a symptomatic response to the historical conditions of middle-stage capitalism; it's manifested prior to the full globalisation of capital. For this reason, in the West, we can no longer be modernist, because we are now fully modernised.³² What is today the current 'modern stage' of Turkey (in terms of capitalism)?

In this case, people act on different sides of 'one narrative' of modernity in one place/time. Both the government of Turkey's interventions and its people's actions appear modern; the former in a fashionable way since their decisions subscribe to capitalism, the latter in an authentic sense because they ask for free/public/common spaces.³³ We can read a comparable contradiction within our retrospective political construct: PM Erdogan and PM Menderes in different times both rely on states of exception, the first by all means eliminates public space in order to privatise it whereas the latter supposedly creates 'modern' public space.

In times of rupture – here, the sense of failure in the modern promise is ever apparent - people stand up for notions of freedom, or denounce the lack thereof. It started off with a subversive claim for their public space, a free space in Prost's sense. It was a place to be saved from the shopping mall, the pseudo-public non-

place. Fighting off this metaphor of the capitalist society, a reactive modernity project still seems at large.

The authenticity of Gezi and the protests on it, deliver a modernity history for Istanbul. The *espace libre* hosts the conflict about the intended shopping mall and the citizens' broader demands. While the period of exceptional processes and public reactions continues, it seems, for now, hard to talk about the end of modernity.

¹ İlhan Tekeli, *Modernizm, Modernite ve Türkiye'nin Kent Planlama Tarihi* (Modernism, Modernity and Turkey's Urban Planning History), Tarih Vakfı Publishing, 2011.

² American literary critic and Marxist theorist

³ Italian philosopher and political theorist

⁴ This can be related to a quote in Detlef Mertins' *Modernity Unbound* (where he refers to Tafuri): "breaking up the master narrative by looking for contradictions and contestations"

⁵ We don't claim that other approaches, which have been developed until now, are incomplete or incorrect. However, we do try to show that an economical approach to divide this history to certain periods (WWII-1960s-1980s), or an evolutionary approach to reason every coming phenomenon with the other (mono-modernism, plural-modernism, populist-modernism) is questionable. (see İlhan Tekeli: "modernity is a project that started in Western Europe, but found different identities in the localities")

⁶ Dora Apel, "Review: A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present by Fredric Jameson", *Contemporary Sociology*, American Sociological Association, 2004, 201-202.

⁷ The four maxims are found in Part 1 of: Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, London, Verso Books, 2002, 250.

⁸ Dora Apel.

⁹ Mark Jarzombek, "A Prolegomena to Critical Historiography", *Journal of Architectural Education*, Washington, ACSA, 1999, 197-206.

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1974.

¹¹ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999.

¹² Regarding modernity the idea of 'the maelstrom' comes from: Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, New York, Penguin Books, 1988, (345-346).

¹³ David Dyzenhaus, *Legality and Legitimacy: Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen and Hermann Heller in Weimar*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 283.

¹⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George D. Schwab), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985, 70.

¹⁵ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 367.

¹⁶ Nasser Hussain and Melissa Ptacek, "Homo Sacer and Sovereign Power and Bare Life by Giorgio Agamben", *Law and Society Review*, Wiley Online Library, 2000, 495-515.

¹⁷ Derek Gregory, "The black flag: Guantánamo Bay and the space of exception", *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, Wiley Online Library, 2006, 405-427.

¹⁸ Menderes once said: "That building across the Spice market, I decided that we should pull that down. Start with the appropriation procedure immediately."

(see: Burak Boysan, "İstanbul'un Sıçrama Noktası", *Osmanlı Başkentinden Küreselleşen İstanbul'a: Mimarlık ve Kent, 1910-2010*, Osmanlı Bank Archive and Research Center, 2010, 81-96.)

¹⁹ For instance, Aksaray square in the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul was refurbished by pulling down 29 examples of significant Muslim heritage, the non-Muslim heritage was not even counted for. (see: Burak Boysan.), see also: further in the paper text at the end of part 3

²⁰ Detlef Mertins, *Modernity Unbound: Other Histories of Architectural Modernity*, London, Architectural Association, 2011, 187.

²¹ For Perry Anderson modernity is as a mediating term, that links modernisation and modernism, and therefore is defined as the 'experience' undergone within modernisation that gives rise to modernism. (see: Perry Anderson, "Modernity and revolution", *New Left Review*, London, 1984, 96-113.)

²² Detlef Mertins.

(see: Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (trans. Frederick Lawrence), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990, 430 (7).)

²³ İlhan Tekeli.

²⁴ İpek Yada Akpınar, "Modern İmgelerin Günlük Yaşamda Mekanlaşması: Prost'un Yeni Kamusalıkları", *Osmanlı Başkentinden Küreselleşen İstanbul'a: Mimarlık ve Kent, 1910-2010*, Osmanlı Bank Archive and Research Center, 2010, 68-81.

²⁵ French architect and urban planner

While Henri Prost was still working on the planning of the Paris metropolitan area as the 'chief urbanist' of the capital, he was invited by the Istanbul Municipality in 1933 to participate in the restricted competition held for the planning work of Istanbul and soon thereafter, in 1935, to directly preside over the city's planning work. The French urbanist was to remain in this position until the end of 1950.

(see: Istanbul Research Institute blog, <http://blog.iae.org.tr/index.php/sergiler/taksim-gezi-parkinin-tarihcesi/?lang=en>)

²⁶ İpek Yada Akpınar.

²⁷ F. Cana Bilsel (see: both references in bibliography)

²⁸ İpek Yada Akpınar.

²⁹ In 1992, Peter Osborne refers to three approaches to the modernity problem (all have been touched in this paper): the ideas of modernity as a category of historical periodization (1), a quality of social experience (2), and an (incomplete) project (3).

(see: Peter Osborne, "Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category", *New Left Review*, London, 1992, 65-84.)

³⁰ The existence and completion of The Modern Project has been broadly questioned and discussed, ranging from Habermas' *Modernity – An Incomplete Project* (1980) to Jameson's recent position on being fully modernised (*A Singular Modernity*, 2002). Or does it all culminate in Bruno Latour, who states exactly halfway that period of time that *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991)?

³¹ Christopher Prendergast, "Codeword Modernity", *New Left Review*, London, 2003, 95-111.

³² Matt Wilkens, Book review (*A Singular Modernity*, 2002), <http://mattwilkens.com/category/theory/>

³³ Christopher Prendergast.

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Captions

Figure 1. Taksim Square and Atatürk Cultural Center, Istanbul, Turkey, Aerial image from during the occupation.

Credits: Anadolu News Agency

Figure 2. Gezi Park and Taksim Square, Istanbul, Turkey, Satellite image from just before the occupation.

Credits: Bing Maps

Figure 3. Atatürk Cultural Center, Istanbul, Turkey, Façade of the building during the occupation.

Credits: <http://danzon2008.blogspot.nl/2013/06/ataturk-kultur-merkezi-taksim-istanbul.html>

Figure 4. Henri Prost, Taksim İnönü Esplanade (project plan), Istanbul, Turkey, 17 November 1939.

Credits: original image from Academie d’architecture / Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine / Archives d’architecture du XXe siècle.

in: Candaş Bilgel, F., Pinon, P., ‘From the Imperial Capital to the Republican Modern City: Henri Prost’s Planning of Istanbul (1936-1951)’, *Istanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü*, April 2010, Istanbul