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“Liberated Neighborhoods”: Reconstructing Leftist Activism in the Urban Periphery

Introduction

This article addresses the phenomenon of what is known as ‘liberated territory’¹ in recent Turkish history (the second half of the 1970s), during which leftist activists² entered the urban periphery for ideological purposes. Using quotations from the interviews with former leftist activists and *gecekondu*³ residents⁴ in Ankara and İzmir,⁵

1 The term “liberated territory” (*kurtarılmış bölge*) is often used to refer to neighborhoods under leftist leadership. This is criticized for adopting a term used by fascists to label a neighborhood as unlawful. In the article, I use it in quotation marks. Some of my respondents also criticized the term. In the words of a local activist: “A liberated neighborhood is a place where the state cannot enter; it is independent of the state. But in Turkey this was never the case.” Rather than using this term, I would prefer to call it “neighborhoods built by the organized power of the people.” Drawing upon the interviewees’ naming, Houston (Christopher Houston, “How Globalization Really Happens: Remembering Activism in the Transformation of Istanbul,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39 (2015): 46–61; and “Revolutionary Ethics: Relations Between Leftist Militants and Gecekondu Dwellers in Istanbul, 1975–1980,” in *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left since the Sixties*, ed. L. Karakatsanis and N. Papadogiyannis (London and New York: Routledge, 2017)) uses the term “districts of resistance” (*direnış mahalleleri*). In the article, I use “liberated territory” and “liberated neighborhood” interchangeably.

2 Respondents active in the leftist movement called themselves “militant” (*militan*). I mostly use “activist” instead because of the negative connotations of the militant in our time, occasionally mentioning them as “ex-militant.” I use pseudonyms for the names of the respondents.

3 *Gecekondu* is the name given to informal housing in the Turkish context.

4 The category “residents” refers to those who are not a member of a political group. This distinction is important because activists can also be residents of *gecekondu* areas.

5 I conducted in-depth interviews with the residents and former activists in the Ege neighborhood at Natoyolu, Mamak, Ankara where I carried out field research between 2000 and 2003 and visited the neighborhood in the later years. I also conducted in-depth interviews with the former activists in several other *gecekondu* neighborhoods: Tuzluçayır (2014), Keçikıran (2014), and Hüseyingazi (2008), all in the Mamak region, and Keçiören (2015) and the Kayalar neighborhood in Şentepe (2008). The latter initially called after a university student, Ertuğrul Karakaya, was killed by the police. I extended my research to İzmir in 2009, interviewing residents in Gültepe-Konak, some of whom were former activists.

I aim to reconstruct the past from the memories⁶ of my respondents, revealing the experience of leftist presence in the *gecekondu* as it is remembered. I focus on the experiences in *gecekondu* neighborhoods as leftist activists experimented, on the one hand, with transforming the urban periphery to provide housing for the poor, and, on the other hand, with the ideological training and mobilization of their inhabitants, which was contested by state authorities and towards the end by the ultranationalists. Thus, it involved violence, leftist militants fighting with the oppositional ultranationalist groups as well as with the state forces when the latter attempted to intervene in the neighborhood and to demolish the houses, with whom negotiations could be carried out otherwise. I argue, first, that leftist groups' experimenting with the *gecekondu* was a decentralized endeavor led by spontaneous decisions rather than a centrally planned one, showing variations in different contexts. Secondly, it was not an inclusive project despite the original aim, mainly Alevi⁷ embracing and religious Sunnis opposing it. Thirdly, it was a topdown ideological project of "enlightening" the urban poor, yet in the practice of constructing houses and infrastructure, and providing services and help to *gecekondu* dwellers, it was a participatory process. And fourthly, although leftist groups moved into the urban periphery to bring class consciousness, they, nonetheless, became new actors in transforming peripheral land, and as such they acted against the commodification of land, prioritizing the use value against the exchange value. Accordingly, moving beyond the simplistic view of the status quo that leftist presence in *gecekondu* areas disrupted the social order, I show the transformative role of the left in the urban periphery, intervening in the unequal power dynamics of urban informality, which instigated violence.

Shedding light on these experiences as they are remembered by the leftist activists of the time and the people who participated in leftist mobilization is

6 Collective memory is selective and filtered; it is an ordering process of self-subjectification embedded in social frameworks (Halbwachs 1992). In this article, I use memory pieces that repeatedly appeared in the interviews as respondents reconstructed the past in the context of their belonging to the group.

7 Alevi refer to the followers of Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of prophet Muhammed, inhabiting Anatolia. They are known as Anatolian Shiites, yet they have significant differences from Shiites in terms of rituals and philosophy. Although Alevism is a sect of Islam characterized by its syncretic and heterodox qualities, it has taken different shapes in different historical eras. For instance, the Alevi youth became devoted supporters of the leftist mobilization in the 1960s, denouncing religion. Today, they are known for their support of secularism and Kemalism. See Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (eds.), *Turkey's Alevi Enigma. A Comprehensive Overview* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); Günter Seufert, "Between Religion and Ethnicity: A Kurdish-Alevi Tribe in Globalizing Istanbul," in *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*, ed. Ayşe Öncü and Peta Weyland (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1997), 157–176.

an important endeavor especially when three interrelated developments in our time are considered, namely, the rapid demolition of *gecekondu* neighborhoods under neoliberal urban policies that aim to extract value from land; the weakening of solidarity among the poor as they are increasingly pulled into consumerism and subjected to individualistic ways of achieving a better life; and the waning of the leftist ideology in the aftermath of the end of the bipolar world system and the global spread of neoliberalism. Looking from the perspective of the activists broadens our understanding of the turmoil in the country at the time. It allows a counter-hegemonic production of knowledge, which is subdued by recent political and economic developments, namely, the rising power of the Islamist AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) government and neoliberalism. By focusing on the spatial practices of leftist activists and their political project embedded in space, the article also contributes to our understanding of the left as they put into action their ideology in and through space.

There are only a few studies on leftist mobilization in *gecekondu* neighborhoods (Aslan 2004; Le Ray 2004; Houston 2015, 2017), all on the Istanbul case. This article aims to contribute to the academic literature by bringing in the cases of Ankara and Izmir, the latter limited to one neighborhood. I focus more on the experiences remembered by the activists than their ideological frames. My research is different from Aslan’s (2004) and Le Ray’s (2004), both on the May First neighborhood (1 Mayıs Mahallesi) in Ümraniye, Istanbul, the iconic neighborhood of resistance (*direniş mahallesi*) of the 1970s, the former focusing on the past and the latter on the present state of affairs in the neighborhood, informing us about the ideological transformation in the *gecekondu* neighborhoods once controlled by the left. It is also different from Houston’s (2015, 2017), who, in his broader goal of exploring spatial politics in Istanbul before its neoliberal transformation, discusses various aspects of transforming space in a phenomenological framework, such as slogans written on walls, songs sung during marches, as well as occupation as spatial practice and violence during breaking occupation, which were part of the contested revolutionary political action in the city in the late 1970s. As such, the attention paid to leftist activism in the urban periphery remains limited.⁸ My

⁸ Houston’s study, which is based on interviews conducted with leftist activists from different fractions and ultranationalists, complements this study. Leftist fractions, whose number reached 45 in the 1970s (Houston, “Revolutionary ethics”, 233), did not come up in the interviews in my research. Once when I asked directly, two respondents told me that leftist groups would respect each other during the invasion of land, and, seeing a group in one neighborhood, would go into a different neighborhood to organize people. This may be explained by the differences in the two cities: the peripheral land in Ankara was abundant, which might have made land invasion less competitive compared to Istanbul. There might also be ideological reasons, leftist fractions

study, by concentrating on the project of “liberated territories” of the left, in which both space and people were targeted for transformation, fills this gap.

In the following sections, I first introduce the *gecekondu* phenomenon briefly. I then move to discuss three interrelated issues in the framework of the leftist intervention in the urban periphery, namely, the attempts of invading land and constructing houses for the poor, building alliances with the local people, and transforming the urban poor into political subjects holding class consciousness. I show that, experimenting with collective mobilization in *gecekondu* areas, leftist activists were involved in transforming peripheral land into neighborhoods on the one hand, and in consciousness-raising activities to “enlighten” *gecekondu* residents on the other hand, the two feeding into each other. In the last section of the empirical chapter, I focus on the violent encounters between the leftist revolutionaries (*devrimci*) and the ultra-national idealists (*ülküücü*) when the two groups contested domination over the urban periphery.

The Gecekondu

The term *gecekondu*, which literally means “landed in the night,” refers to the houses built mostly on state land in the peripheries of metropolitan cities without the consent of the state. Since the 1980s when building apartment houses of up to four stories on *gecekondu* land was legalized by a series of laws, *gecekondu*s have entered a new phase in which particularly those located in favorable locations are being transformed, both in form and land status, making the term obsolete. Yet the term is still used, this time, to refer to the unregulated construction of apartment buildings as well as new constructions on the farther peripheries of cities (Perouse 2004).⁹ In the sections below, I provide information on the development and growth of *gecekondu* areas in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a discussion of the challenges to the sustainability of *gecekondu* formation in the 1970s.

in Istanbul more driven by competition than their counterparts in Ankara. The respondents may also have a more positive memory than what the reality was about. This issue needs further exploration.

⁹ See Jean-François Perouse (“Deconstructing the *gecekondu*.” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Thematic issue *Gecekondu*, no. 1 (2004): 1–8) for a rich discussion of the different meanings of the term *gecekondu* in the context of legal and social changes since its first appearance in 1947.

The First *Gecekondus* and Conservative Politics in the 1950s and 1960s

The formation of informal housing in the peripheries of Turkish metropolises in the aftermath of WWII is part of a larger phenomenon in which capitalist modernization increasingly transformed the so-called Third World. In Turkey, as new technology and agricultural products entered the villages via the Marshall Aid of the United States, a new economic system was initiated that displaced landless peasants, sharecroppers and small land owners, paving the path to “rapid urbanization” (Karpas 1976; Keleş 2012). Istanbul was the main destination of migrants who left their villages for economic reasons. It was the city whose streets were paved with gold (*taşı toprağı altın*) that implied the quick way of becoming rich. Ankara as the modern capital city under construction and Izmir as the port city were other places of attraction for rural migrants.

The import-substituting industrialization (ISI) marks the period of 1950–1980 in the “Third World,” in which a model of development that advocates for the industrialization of the country was adopted. In Turkey, industrialization in cities as the main target for economic development needed cheap labor, which was provided by the flocks of migrants from the countryside. Some scholars argue that, in the Turkish context where elections are held regularly, a “populist coalition” was formed among industrialists seeking cheap labor, politicians seeking loyalty and votes, rural migrants seeking affordable housing, and the state seeking to be exempt from the responsibility of solving the housing problem of the poor (Keyder 2000; Ünsal and Kuyucu 2010). Accordingly, *gecekondus* mushroomed in the peripheries of cities. The low level of industrialization, however, kept formal employment in factories limited, paving the path to an expanding informal economy. It prevented the integration of rural migrants into urban society, constraining their transformation from peasant to proletarian. Quite the reverse occurred in fact, as the peasant identity was reinforced as migrants formed their rural communities in the city as a result of chain migration: they invaded land in the peripheries of cities, often with their fellow villagers and relatives, and built their houses, living with them in the same area (Karpas 1976; Payne 1982; Şenyapılı 1982).

The invasion of land was not usually an organized act, which acted against the potential to produce an oppositional collective identity challenging the status quo. In most cases, it was carried out spontaneously by family members and small groups of relatives, and in rare cases by friends from the workplace. The name for informal housing in Turkey, *gecekondu* signifies its spontaneous nature in its early phase. What makes the Turkish *gecekondu* formation successful when compared to other countries is the availability of state land (Keyder 2000). On the

vacant state land in the periphery of cities, migrants clustered with the people from the same place of origin, producing pockets of social homogeneity in terms of sectarian and ethnic identity, which would change to some extent as the urban peripheral land got crowded under successive waves of migration from the countryside (Payne 1982; Seufert 1997; Erman 2011). Migrants developed survival strategies by forming solidarity with the people from their places of origin (*hemşehri*), whose terms of inclusion/exclusion varied according to context: their villagers, those from their city, and those from their geographical region could be included into the category of *hemşehri* (Güneş-Ayata 1991; Hersant and Toumarkine 2005).

Transferring land into a residential area needed residents' collective action, which they did by bargaining with municipal authorities for infrastructure and services in return of their votes. They also contributed their labor to build roads, to dig drainage canals and so on, which the city government would or could not do because of its limited resources. Interested in improving their neighborhoods, they would set up local associations. Heper (1982) observed that, in the *gecekondu* district in the vicinity of Robert College – Hisarüstü in Istanbul, Alevis were organized into “neighborhood beautification associations” (*mahalle güzelleştirme dernekleri*), whereas Sunnis established “mosque building associations” (*cami yaptırma dernekleri*).¹⁰ In their pragmatic goals, they would vote for those political parties that promised them gains, such as the legalization of their *gecekondu* land and the services for their *gecekondu* neighborhood. It conflicted with their class position when they voted for right-wing parties in the 1950s and 1960s (Danielson and Keleş 1985). In the larger urban society in this period, they were defined by their culture rather than by their class position; in the imaginary of the established urbanites, the *gecekondu* represented the “rural Other” (Erman 2001).

To sum up, an informal housing regime of poor rural migrants was established, which was embedded in the social networks that migrants formed with those from the same place of origin, reproducing their rural identity in the urban context. It was supported by populist politics as politicians approached *gecekondu* people for political gains. And *gecekondu* dwellers, in their new consciousness that they developed upon their move to the city, formed alliances

10 One explanation for the presence of Alevi and Sunni neighborhoods would be to assume that Alevis would cluster with other Alevis because of their collective identity, which would protect them against discrimination in a mixed neighborhood of Sunnis and Alevis. Another explanation, on the other hand, would be to consider it as the outcome of the separation of Alevi settlements from those of Sunnis in Anatolia as the former built their villages mostly on top of mountains for protection from the state. In chain migration, as those from the same village/town clustered in the same *gecekondu* area, Alevi and Sunni *gecekondu* neighborhoods would appear.

with the status quo from which they could benefit, supporting political parties that would serve their pragmatic interests. It conflicted with their class position as the providers of cheap labor to economy.

Challenges and New Dynamics in the 1970s

In the 1970s, this informal housing regime was challenged by developments both on the global and national scales. The world economy went into recession, triggered by the oil crisis of 1973. The reflections of the economic crises were clearly seen in the lives of many *gecekondu* residents as unemployment rates increased and wages decreased. It eroded their expectations for better lives in the city, which they had in the previous decades. Moreover, poor people’s access to land to build houses was curbed as the peripheral land was consumed under the new waves of migration, and as illegal groups who claimed authority in *gecekondu* areas appeared, selling plots of land after enclosing large tracks of land and subdividing them (‘the *gecekondu* mafia’)¹¹ (Işık and Pınarcıoğlu 2001). The state’s unwillingness or inability to take responsibility for the housing problem of the urban poor, and politicians’ limited interest in *gecekondu* people as potential voters (Öncü 1988) left the poor unprotected against the abuse of the mafia. The 1970s were the years of the start for the commodification of the *gecekondu* (Şenyapılı 1982); as apartment houses in the informal sector replaced owner-occupied self-help houses, *gecekondus* gained exchange value. Poor people’s building their own houses was further blocked in the aftermath of the March 12, 1971 military memorandum. In the military’s goal of bringing law back into society, many *gecekondus* were demolished and the construction of new ones was strictly prohibited (Erman and Aslan 2014). More important for this article is that the society was highly politicized, including the *gecekondu* youth. Growing up in the city, some had higher education and some were members of labor unions (Heper 1982; Öncü 1988). Different from their parents who, comparing it to their lives in the village, were content with their lives in the city, they were frustrated by the structural inequalities strongly felt in big cities. Under the leftist ideology

¹¹ The mafia in the *gecekondu*, as the term suggests, acted as the guardian in some cases, protecting the *gecekondu* area against demolition. They would bargain with municipal authorities to stop a possible demolition or to obtain services, often bribing them. They would also become involved in community affairs, for instance, acting as a matchmaker (Tahire Erman, “Kentsel dönüşüm projeleri ve yeniden yerleşme deneyimleri: Karşılaştırmalı ve zaman boyutlu bir yaklaşım” In TUBİTAK, project no. 109K360.2014).

crystallized in the 1960s, some were critical of capitalism and were committed to the revolutionary transformation of society. This affected the role of local associations: the neighborhood associations of the 1960s, whose goal was to improve their housing environment, gained a political nature in the 1970s. For instance, when the Hisariüstü Neighborhood Beautification Association, which was closed during the military memorandum in 1971, was reopened in 1974, it was “much politicized, or rather radicalized” (Heper 1982).

Under the growing economic problems that deteriorated the living conditions of rural migrants, making their aspirations hard to realize, and the increasing disadvantages in access to peripheral land, the right conditions were present for leftist organizations to intervene.

Leftist Activists in the Urban Periphery

In the sections below, I discuss the spatial and political practices of leftist activists in the urban periphery. I focus on two goals of leftist activists in their intervention in *gecekondu* areas, namely, solving the housing problem of the urban poor, which was framed by the Marxist ideology that prioritizes the use value against the exchange value in capitalist society (“housing the poor”), and transforming the poor into political subjects with class consciousness (“envisioning the poor as political subjects”), the former often used as a means of achieving the latter. I discuss how the two goals are pursued and experienced as they are remembered today. In the section between the two, i.e., “building local alliance,” I introduce the divided nature of the *gecekondu* population: while Alevi embraced the leftist presence, religious Sunnis did not.

Housing the Poor

In this first section of the empirical chapter, I identify four major themes that emerged during the interviews, namely, the collective nature of building houses and neighborhoods; the struggles leftist groups had that included fighting against the practices of the *gecekondu* mafia to commodify land; their idealism in invading land to distribute to the poor and helping them to build their housing environment; and their criteria about land allocation rooted in their political ideology, all of which are related to how the leftist groups envisioned the housing of the working class and how they aimed to transform the urban periphery for it.

The *gecekondu* experiment of the left started in 1976, following the general amnesty in 1974 that included leftist prisoners who were jailed during the military regime following the memorandum of 12 March 1971. Frustrated with the Turkish military and searching for new ideologies, the left was divided into three major fractions: pro-Soviet (Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP – Turkish Communist Party), Maoist (Halkın Kurtuluşu), and Latin American-inspired anti-imperialist group (Devrimci-Yol) (Houston 2017). Another fraction evolved in 1972 when Kurdish leftists, under the leadership of İbrahim Kaypakkaya, dissociated themselves from their Turkish counterparts “to begin their own war of liberation” (Bozarslan in this book). In this new era for the left, some leftist organizations felt the need to extend their activities beyond universities and unions where they were active in the 1960s to move into the neighborhoods of the urban poor.¹² Witnessing the sharpening housing problem of the poor, they felt that it was the right time to make their presence in *gecekondu* areas. They defined as one of their goals to solve the housing problem of the “working class,”¹³ and in their slogans, they had “the right to housing as a main element of class struggle” (Aslan 2004). They argued that the housing problem was the product of the capitalist system, land should be in the possession of people, and it should not be treated as a commodity to make profit.

The practices of leftist activists were twofold: first, in their view of the right to decent housing for everyone, they enclosed the vacant land that belonged to the state (they were careful not to invade land that belonged to individuals), subdivided it into plots, and gave the plots to those in need of housing; and secondly, they helped to build the houses and the infrastructure in the new areas, and in some cases they planned the area, and in the already established areas, they upgraded the neighborhood, constructing infrastructure such as roads, drainage canals, and electric poles to be connected to power lines.

In their memories, bonding with people as they built the neighborhoods collectively had an important place. In the words of a Gültepe activist:

12 This mission was contested among different leftist fractions. While some of them, in their belief that violence was a legitimate tool for revolutionary ends, would oppose it, others believed that the working class would lead the revolution, for which *gecekondu* residents should be educated about the exploitation of the working class in the capitalist system.

13 I use the term in quotation marks to show my reservation: in *gecekondu*s, working in factories was limited; many *gecekondu* dwellers were employed in the informal sector (small family enterprises, street vending, and the like). Thus, defining them in this category would not be totally correct.

There was a need for a retaining wall in one part of the neighborhood, but the municipality lacked the resources to do it. The mayor¹⁴ told us to build it. He said he would send some machinery. We invited revolutionary friends working in other neighborhoods and we built the wall. The people in the neighborhood cooked beans and rice and set a big table on the floor. We were almost 100, we sat down together with the people and ate our food, feeling united. (Gültepe, İzmir) (interview, 17.1.2009)

They talked again with excitement about their experience of invading land and distributing it to the people (*halk*). In the words of two former activists who were themselves *gecekondu* residents:

There was vacant land up on the hillside. We got organized and invaded the land to distribute it to the people. Ten thousand acres of land. We saved some space to build roads, and the rest we gave to the people. We were invaders (*işgalci*). Our only concern was to provide the people with a place to live. (Keçikıran-Mamak, Ankara) (interview, 25.5.2014)

We announced it, ‘Come here and build your own houses.’ There were a few families who had built their houses there. Some women had sold their golden bracelets¹⁵ to be able to pay the mafia. We said we would give the land for free but we would only give it to those who were in need of housing. (Kayalar/Ertuğrul Karakaya, Ankara) (interview, 30.7.2008)

As seen above, they were careful to make sure that the land they invaded would go only to those who were not homeowners. Ideally, they would opt for collective ownership, but they had to make compromises. As Aslan’s research in the May First neighborhood (2004) shows, they had to accept people’s homeownership rights, but they insisted that each family would have only one house. This was contested by some people who wanted larger tracks of land so that their relatives could build their houses next to them. In a local leader’s words, it was because people could not have developed urban consciousness (*kentleşme bilinci*) (Aslan 2004). In my research, similar criteria were applied for land allocation, yet with some recognition of rural culture. Describing the formation of a new neighborhood in Hüseyingazi (Mamak, Ankara) in 1978, which they called “Ulaştepe” after Ulaş Bardakçı,¹⁶ Haydar said:

We did not allocate more than 350 or 400 square meters of land for each family. Since we were from the same culture, we thought it would be good to spare 100 square meters for

¹⁴ The mayor was from the CHP (Republican People’s Party), which maintained the “left of center” political position in the leadership of Ecevit.

¹⁵ It is a tradition in Turkish society to give golden bracelets and golden coins to the bride on the wedding day.

¹⁶ Ulaş Bardakçı (1942–1972) is a revolutionary who was active in the formation of Dev-Genç. In the late 1970s, he participated in founding THKP-C along with Mahir Çayan. He was killed by the police in 1972.

the house and the rest for the garden¹⁷ where people would grow their own tomatoes, peppers, corns and keep poultry. (interview, 25.5.2014)

The collective nature of building the houses remained in the memories of Haydar, which, as he regretted, could not be extended to pooling money to buy building materials collectively: “We just went and invaded the land and distributed it to the people, showing them where they would build their houses. Each household bought their construction materials on their own budget. Everybody helped everybody else and built their houses collectively. What turned out was a *gecekondu* neighborhood in the making.” (Keçikıran-Mamak, Ankara) (interview, 25.5.2014)

They believed that building the houses collectively would make them live as a community in solidarity, improving the neighborhood collectively, sharing its costs equally, and participating in decision-making (Aslan 2004). In their modernist approach, they wanted to produce planned neighbourhoods with proper streets and ample public spaces for residents to come together to socialize.¹⁸

They envisioned neighborhoods that would stay outside the capitalist housing market, the use value of housing replacing the exchange value. They would fight against the *gecekondu* mafia to end their rent-seeking activities. As Zakir, who was active in the formation of the Kayalar/ Ertuğrul Karakaya neighborhood in Yenimahalle, told, the mafia would be active in those areas close to the city center, and especially those close to factories, carrying out rent-seeking activities, and it was an important goal of the revolutionary¹⁹ groups to force the mafia out, ending their exploitation of the poor. He narrated in details:

We looked at the map of Ankara. On it, the areas controlled by different mafia groups were marked in colors. Each of us would go to a specific area to fight the mafia that was active there. I chose the area where the most powerful mafia was in control. I wanted to get rid of them and open the site to the free occupation of the people.

In the talk I had with Zakir, it became clear that the mafia were not necessarily criminals in the common sense of the word; ordinary citizens could also be seen as part of the mafia when they tried to keep public land in their possession:

Every piece of land in the city’s periphery had its own mafia. Here was a woman lawyer who claimed that she owned huge amounts of land going up to Kayalar. That land

17 The ideal was to have single-family houses with gardens if the land was available, which was more true for Ankara than Istanbul where houses next to each other lined the street.

18 This would be the urban version of traditional solidarity in rural areas. They intended to promote it through the physical planning of the neighborhoods with courtyards where neighbors would meet each other and socialize.

19 The terms “leftist” and “revolutionary” are used interchangeably. In the interviews, “revolutionaries” (*devrimciler*) was commonly used.

belonged to the state. There was a sergeant who cooperated with her, he would often eat in her place. She had enclosed the land by a 3-meter-high wall and had planted some thousand trees there. She had an armed guard waiting at the entrance.

The encounter between her group and the people would end up in violence:

They wanted to stop us. They were terrified and called the *jandarma*.²⁰ We went into a fight. Some of us were beaten, some of us had broken arms. The people who were with us got so angry that, for revenge, they destroyed her place and used the stones and iron bars from the wall in the construction of their houses. Constructing more and more houses, we established our neighborhood.

The unequal distribution of power shaped the politics in the urban periphery as groups organized themselves using their connections with authorities. In this context of fiercely contested land among those who wanted to find land to build their houses and those who wanted to enclose land to sell, the leftist intervention would be welcomed by the poor in their state of insecurity.²¹ In Kayalar/Ertuğrul Karakaya, Satı, a long-term resident, said that, before the leftist involvement, there were only seven or eight houses in the area. Buying the land from the mafia, the families had built their houses by their own labor. When the area came under the leftist leadership, the number of families increased fast. Again, in Zakir's narrative:

We invaded the land [in the fight against the local mafia]. We called the labor unions and other civil society organizations, telling them to ask their members if they wanted to build their houses in this area. We told them that the foundations of the houses were already dug. It initiated a big flow of people into the area, tenants taking the lead. And once one family moved in, their relatives followed, causing an increase in the number of the houses.

Zakir, now an older man in his 70s, sitting in the room of the neighborhood association he set up, talked with pride about how he carried university students in his car to their dormitories late at night after their work for the day was done: "Every day, some 150 students from different universities worked in the construction of the houses. They worked with shovels and pickaxes until two in the morning. I would drive them back to their dormitories. We were building the houses on a very steep slope. It was so difficult. There was no electricity. We used gas lamps." He continued: "My friends from ODTÜ (Middle East Technical University) would come to draw the plans of the area."

²⁰ *Jandarma* in Turkish is the military law enforcement. Its area of jurisdiction is outside the city centers and its duties are similar to those of the French *gendarmarie* or Italian *carabinieri*.

²¹ This should be read with reservation. Discussed later in the article, it would be mostly Alevis and not Sunnis who would embrace leftist support.

As I observed, the prestige he had in old days had gone. The association he had established, a small room heated by stove, was hardly an office. In his neighborhood where the construction of new apartment blocks was replacing *gecekondus*, and new people were moving in, he was trying to keep up the old dream alive.

In the Ege neighborhood at Natoyolu, there was again the issue of the mafia, but this time it was the *muhtar* (the elected head of the village) who was selling for profit the land that belonged to the village, and those involved were not a militant group organized to invade land to distribute it to the people but those who wanted to form their leftist community but could not find vacant land to build their houses in Tuzluçayır, the district nearby known as the castle of the left. Illustrating the varied ways and reasons of land occupation, Cevdet, one of the leaders of the group, described his own experience as follows:

There was no land left to build houses in Tuzluçayır, so we moved here. The place was barely populated. Twenty to 25 houses scattered around, inhabited by the people working in the brick factory nearby. We were about 150 families. We were going to build a community of our own. But some of my friends gave up when they found out that the land was the nearby village's pasture. They said it would conflict with their socialist values, that *devrimciler* [revolutionaries] would never take away land from villagers. But the village *muhtar* would sell the land anyway. (Ege, Ankara) (interview, 17.4.2002)

Taking a stand against the *muhtar*'s opening the village land for sale, some 70 families stayed and started to build their houses.

Remembering the experiences in the formation of the Ege neighborhood, the activists again talked about their struggle to build a neighborhood of a progressive community by their limited resources. In their embeddedness in leftist mobilization, they would use their personal connections, calling university students and labor unions to help them. They would negotiate with authorities on the one hand, and try to persuade local people about the success of their project on the other hand. In the interviews, the issue of the participation of university students in the construction of the infrastructure again came up: they would build roads, dig canals for drainage pipes, and erect electric poles; students from the architecture and urban planning departments would contribute by drawing the plan of the neighborhood. The labor they put in the process of constructing the neighborhood and mobilizing their personal connections was in the memory of Cevat, a resident and a local ex-militant: “I had a relative working in the department of water works. By his help, I got a truck full of pipes. When people saw the pipes, they completely believed us; they believed that we would keep our promises.” Persuading people in the success of the project and persuading themselves were the two sides of the same coin. In Gültepe-Izmir, Coşkun talked about it:

We set up an association and solved the sewage problem of the neighborhood. This gave us the feeling that we could be successful with our project. This helped us form a good relationship with the local people. After the sewage problem, came the water problem. We contacted the mayor. He said he would support us. We set up a committee and started collecting money from the local people. Using the money, we bought water pipes and began to dig canals. In this way, we solved the water problem of the neighborhood.

(interview, 17.1.2009)

Reconstructing the past from the memories of the former leftist activities, I summarize the physical transformation of the urban periphery under the leftist leadership as follows. The practices varied, ranging from building a completely new neighborhood to invading state land and, after distributing the plots to the people, leaving it to them to build their houses. But, in all cases, leftist activists embraced the ideals of solidarity and collective action, and the home as the place to live and not as a commodity to make profit from: they attempted to organize local people to build their houses and neighborhoods collectively; they enforced the use value of housing, making sure that each family had only one house, which could be contested by some people demanding more and bigger plots/houses. And, in their recognition of the way of life of rural migrants in some cases, they spared space on each plot to be used as a garden to grow vegetables. This would be because of the presence of local activists in the group, who were the children of rural migrants and had grown up in *gecekondus*. In some cases, university students who were not *gecekondu* dwellers participated, planning the neighborhood; and in some other cases, local activists did the planning, using their experiences. As they transformed the urban periphery to solve the housing problem of the poor, by naming some neighborhoods after the revolutionaries who lost their lives fighting for the revolution, or after the events/days of the socialist movement, they also inserted their ideology into space. As they became the new actors in the urban periphery, bringing their own ideology that contradicted with the practices of the *gecekondu* mafia, the two groups could engage in acts of violence.

The endeavor of leftist activists to produce the use value in housing was reversed in the aftermath of the military coup of September 12, 1980 when *gecekondus* gained exchange value in the neoliberal urban policies of the Özal government that came to power in the elections held in 1982: the *gecekondu* land was legalized by a series of amnesties and *gecekondu* owners were given the right to have apartment houses of up to four storeys on their plot. The role that the activists had played in transferring rent to people, which was against their intention, was a big frustration: “We distributed land to people, 400 m² each. Now they have received three or four apartments in return. They are not poor anymore. Quite the opposite, they are quite rich. They have changed. They don’t even spare a moment of their time to say hello.” The goal of ideological

transformation which, as this quotation shows, largely failed, is the next subject to follow. But prior to it, we need to discuss the nature and scope of the alliance of *gecekondu* residents with leftist activists, which would inform the readers about who the “urban poor” in the leftist project were.

Building Local Alliance

The idea that sectarian/religious identities would fragment the leftist movement and impede the formation of class consciousness and thus should remain unrecognized was common among the leftists, but the reality was far from it. Leftist activists were welcomed in those *gecekondu* neighborhoods where the majority of residents were Alevi, who would be inclined to position themselves against the status quo in the Sunni-dominated Turkish society: May First neighborhood in Ümraniye²² (Aslan, 2004), Gülsuyu neighborhood in Maltepe (Bozkulak, 2005), and Okmeydanı neighborhood in Şişli (Massicard, 2005), all in Istanbul; and Tuzluçayır in Mamak (Ankara) and Gültepe in Konak (Izmir). In Gülsuyu, the resistance to the attempts of *gecekondu* demolition was transformed into an organized act under the leadership of student militants. The fact that it was a poor neighborhood where Alevi were the majority played a role in the neighborhood’s gaining a political identity (Bozkulak 2005). This was similar in Okmeydanı, which also housed mostly the Alevi working class (Massicard 2005). Thus, in the Turkish context, the alliance of the poor with leftist groups was built upon the sectarian identity of a minority group, Alevi.²³ Voting behavior in the 1970s divided *gecekondu* neighborhoods: In a research conducted in Istanbul, it was found out that Alevi residents in a *gecekondu* neighborhood voted for left-wing parties, mainly CHP (the Republican People’s Party) with its new “left-of-center” position, along with BP (the Unity Party) set up by a group of Alevi and TKP (the Communist Party of Turkey), whereas Sunni residents voted for right-wing parties, mainly AP (the Justice Party) and MHP (the Nationalist Action Party) (Dubetsky 1977). Alevi were also disproportionately present in the leftist/socialist movement. It should be noted that among the leftist youth there were also Sunnis; under the *zeitgeist* of the era, some of those in conservative Sunni families from Anatolia were turning to the leftist ideology,

²² Its name was changed to “Mustafa Kemal neighborhood” in the aftermath of the military coup of 1980.

²³ See Elise Massicard’s article in this volume for the reinvention of Aleviness in the 1960s as part of the leftist ideology.

who were mostly those in higher education and those working in factories and members of labor unions.

In the interviews, when I asked the former militants about the Alevi-Sunni difference and their approach to it, the responses varied regarding the cause of the differences, but there was consensus on the idea that it would be mainly Alevis who would support them.²⁴ When I asked why it would be Alevis who would support the leftist mobilization, Veli, an Alevi “organic intellectual”²⁵ who was born into a rural migrant family and today a writer, grounding his argument in the history of Alevis, claimed that Alevis’ siding with the left was a natural outcome: “In the history of Alevis, there is Sultan Abdal who was executed by hanging, there is Nesimi who was killed by his skin peeled off, there is Şeyh Bedrettin. They all resisted the authorities.” He continued:

Alevis lived in isolation in their villages for centuries and kept themselves away from state institutions. They created their own legal and social systems. Alevi culture is about sharing and solidarity. Their culture of caring for each other made it possible to survive in the face of discrimination and poverty. In an Alevi village, everybody would help everybody else. Those who are poor, they would help them. This is our culture, this is who we are, this is what our Alevi identity is about. We resist those who hold power. In the 1960s, when socialism came into Turkish society, this ideology, of course, attracted Alevis.

(interview, 11.9.2003)

Another Alevi activist explained it by the socio-political conditions in society. He said, in the politicized Turkish society, Alevis had no other choice: since they were the stigmatized Other, they could not stay neutral; living under the threat of the Sunni state, they would naturally support the left. Putting the two things together, Ercan, with whom I talked in the building of an Alevi association in Gültepe-Izmir, said, “I think the Alevi philosophy is one factor. Another factor is the oppression Alevis experience in their everyday lives. All this makes Alevis revolutionary, they are progressive” (Gültepe-Izmir) (interview, 17.1.2009).

Accordingly, the leftist project in the urban periphery advanced in those areas where Alevis were clustered. It would be the conscious choice of leftist groups to choose these areas for their projects. A young woman of Alevi origin said, “Here people hold leftist ideas. If they had different opinions about politics, we would not come here. The majority are Alevis” (Kayalar, Ankara). Hasan, a

²⁴ The discussion of the question of why Alevis supported leftist mobilization extends beyond the goal of this article. Yet, with the quotations from the interviews, I aim to familiarize the readers with the views of the activists on this issue.

²⁵ I use Gramsci’s term “organic intellectual” to refer to those activists who were children of rural migrant parents, got higher education, and committed themselves to the consciousness-raising of people, engaging in intellectual debates and militant praxis.

former activist from Tuzlucaýır, confirmed: “Tuzlucaýır has a progressive social structure because of its Alevi residents. So, it was easier for us to organize the residents.” In Ege, the former *muhtar* woman (the elected head of the neighborhood) was straightforward about the Alevi-Sunni divide in her neighborhood in the 1970s: “Alevi would be the left, Sunnis would be the right.”

Respondents were divided in their views on the relationship between the left and Sunnis. Some argued that, in their engagement in the *gecekodu*, Sunnis were not automatically excluded from their project. In the words of Emin in Keçikıran:

When we committed ourselves to the revolution, we started visiting homes in our neighborhood. Our neighbors, both Sunnis and Alevi, liked us. We were respectful, we were fighting for their benefit. We were trying to bring urban services to the neighborhood. We were carrying their coal sacks on our backs to their storage rooms. 80 percent, 90 percent of the Sunnis in the neighborhood supported us. (interview, 25.5.2014)

He went on, telling me that they did not discriminate against the Sunni families:

Ulaştepe at Hüseyingazi, we went there in 1978. We fought with the military police and invaded the land. We gave plots of land to families in need of shelter regardless of their religious sect or political views. For example, we gave land to a Sunni family who attended the mosque and voted for the right-wing Justice Party. Our only concern was to keep out those who were the militants of the ultranationalist right. They would report us to the police.

The same attitude appears in another quotation by Hüseyin in Keçiören: “I never asked myself if someone was an Alevi or a Sunni. But I asked myself if they would report us to the police.”

On the other hand, leftist militants had a negative reaction to religious Sunnis in the Kayalar and Ege neighborhoods where Alevi were the majority. The quotation from Zakir gives us some clues: “There was a practicing Sunni woman (abdestli namazlı) from Kızılcahamam (a village of Ankara). She was living here before our construction started. The revolutionary youth did not want her. They said she was a real fascist. So, she had to leave.” The former Alevi *muhtar* woman of Ege talked in the same vein: “Sunnis in this neighborhood would not dare to oppose to our rules, to our will. They knew that they would be punished otherwise.” In the interviews with some Sunni residents in the Ege neighbourhood, I found out that, during the strong presence of the left in the neighbourhood, some had to leave their houses and move out of the neighbourhood because of the fear that their lives were in danger, and others kept a low-profile. In other neighborhoods, those Sunnis who were not radically politicized against the left would accept the leftist presence in their neighborhood: some

would give a “donation” to the leftist youth.²⁶ This was partly out of intimidation and partly because of the wish to be on the side of the powerful.

To be able to make sense of the approach of the leftist activists to Alevi and Sunni residents, we need to understand their views on religion. In the research, there was no consensus on this issue. Working in different contexts, they expressed different views and experiences. Hüseyin, who was responsible for Keçiören, a Sunni-dominated conservative district, and lives now in Germany, narrated:

We did not oppose to religion. We were even moralist (*ahlakçı*) in stronger ways than the ordinary residents. We forbid drinking alcohol, we tried not to contradict *gecekodu* people's values.²⁷ The idea that leftists are against religion is the right's attempt to stigmatize the left. When ultranationalists became organized, they attacked the left for their atheism.

(interview, 19.4.2008)

He now regrets it because “later we were criticized for ruralizing the left.” On the other hand, in Tuzlucağır where Alevis were the majority, religious practices were forbidden. Hasan described the situation as follows:

Alevis could not perform their *cem*²⁸ rituals. Once there was a *cem* ceremony in Kartaltepe. It was performed in a house in secrecy. As socialists, we didn't welcome religious ceremonies [...] In Tuzlucağır, residents were more assimilated [into secular society]. Sunnis practiced their daily prayers (*namaz*) in secrecy. Anyway, there was no mosque in the district.

(interview, 12.7.2003)

Emin, the activist responsible for Keçikıran-Mamak, told how the militants in his group negotiated their approach to religion with the Sunni residents in his neighborhood:

Our Sunni neighbors knew that we were the *kızılbaş*.²⁹ We would never discuss religious issues with them. We were respectful to them. We would put out our cigarettes when we met them. We would do what a proper neighborliness required. But we would never hide the fact that we did not fast during the Ramadan.

Traditional values of rural migrants posed another challenge for the activists. In their respect for *gecekodu* people's culture, Emin told me, they felt the need

26 Houston (“Revolutionary Ethics”) mentions the “revolutionary tax” leftist militants asked from local shopkeepers and small businesses.

27 In some cases, this moralist position went so far as asking female student activists to dress conservatively and demanding official marriage for leftist couples.

28 Cem rituals are religious ceremonies of Alevis during which *saz* (a stringed musical instrument) is played and *semah* (a type of dancing to reach God) is performed.

29 It literally means “redhead.” It is a term used in history to call Alevis, which has become a derogatory term used by Sunnis.

to be patient: “It was necessary not to offend them by disrespecting their values. They had come from the village and had a conservative social structure. For instance, it would not be appropriate for couples to kiss when they were around.” His wife supported his view:

At ODTÜ [Middle East Technical University], we were lying down on the grass, men and women next to each other. But when we were in a *gecekondu* area, we would be careful about our behavior. They [gecekondu people] were in the leftist movement but they had rural origins, they were traditional people. We could not expect them to change all of a sudden, abandoning their patriarchal values.

Commenting on the interview responses, I suggest, first, that the attitude of the left towards religion was one of the most unresolved aspects of the *gecekondu* project: on the one hand, they wanted to “enlighten” rural migrants about the opium effect of religion, as theorized by Marx (“religion is the opium of the masses”), and on the other hand, they wanted to fit in with the masses and to respect their values so that they would be accepted. This dilemma was partly resolved by the alliance of Alevi with the left, who were more secular and less devoted to Islam than their Sunni counterparts. Secondly, I suggest that leftist militants did not have an all-encompassing and clearly defined strategy about how to intervene in the lives and minds of the traditional *gecekondu* people from conservative Anatolian villages. Nonetheless, in their vision of creating a society free from the oppressive nature of religion and the exploitation of the capitalist state, they aimed at transforming the urban poor into political subjects who were conscious of class structure and their disadvantageous position in it. In the section that follows, I delve into how this goal unfolded in practice.

Envisioning the Poor as Political Subjects

The discussion of the engagement of leftists with the project of enlightening the urban poor, who were mainly migrants from the Anatolian countryside, aiming to transform them into political subjects with class consciousness frames this section. Exploring the mutual relationship between the leftists’ goal of ideological transformation and their practice of helping *gecekondu* inhabitants in their everyday lives, which could be interpreted as a strategy used to secure their presence in *gecekondu* areas, I ask to what extent *gecekondu* inhabitants were ideologically committed to the project. The section ends by discussing the transformative role of collective mobilization in the everyday experiences of people, especially during resistance against the intervention by the police.

The leftist youth working together with the poor to build houses and neighborhoods had its root in the former's goal of ideological transformation of the latter to bring class consciousness. In the interviews conducted with the former leftist activists, the political education of the poor, which would make them understand their conditions of oppression, emerged as a central theme. A second theme was about the alliance of (some) *gecekondu* inhabitants with the activists as the latter helped them solve daily problems.

Leftist activists had various ways of putting into practice their goal of the urban poor's ideological transformation. In the May First neighborhood, they aimed to govern the neighborhood by forming a formal structure that would allow local participation. As Aslan (2004) writes, they set up a "people's committee" (*halk komitesi*) following the decision of the residents for leftist leadership and against the practice of bribing authorities for the neighborhood's survival. The people's committee took on the role of regulating the *gecekondu* construction process in the neighborhood. Daily meetings with residents would be held and weekly decisions would be taken about local affairs. All decisions would be recorded. This formalization of *gecekondu* formation and the regulation of everyday life was very different from the regime of informality in *gecekondu* neighborhoods in which families were vulnerable to external threats, such as the demolition threats by the police and the impediment to land occupation set by the mafia, and they had to cope with them individually, bribing authorities and paying the mafia for state land. In the new regime, participation in the meetings and events organized by the committee was required, which, the activists believed, would bring class consciousness along with solidarity among the local residents. In my research, a similar approach to governing liberated territories was adopted, with some context-based differences, detailed below.

In the project of ideological transformation, seminars and workshops would be organized, along with events such as concerts and plays. In the People's Houses (*Halk Evleri*) in Mamak, educational courses were offered for children, along with *saz*³⁰ and literacy classes for adults, and tailoring courses for women. In Ege, local committees were set up for the participation of residents in neighborhood affairs, enabling local decision-making; meetings, debates, picnics, and festivals were organized to create a sense of community and political awareness. In Kayalar/Ertuğrul Karakaya, meetings with the local people were organized to inform them, among other things, about the right to housing and the criteria

30 A stringed musical instrument played in folk music. In leftists' calling for bonding with the people, it became the symbol of leftist mobilization. The presence of the *saz* in the *cem* ceremonies of Alevis brought another layer of meaning.

used by activists about allocating land for house construction, for instance, no more than one house for each family and why it should be so. Zakir talked about the importance of the meetings and the commitment people had to attend them: “It was good for them to listen to what we had to say. It was a political struggle. They had to be informed. Many were tired after working at the construction of the houses. Some would fall asleep during the talks. Yet, they would always come.” He continued, “We built an ‘education and culture center.’ We would do all kinds of activities there. We would celebrate special days, such as the Mayday.”

Haydar, an ex-militant who lived in Hüseyingazi-Mamak told me, “Home visits were very important. We would go in groups of two: one woman and one man. We would give the youth books to read. We made it our task to distribute a certain number of newspapers every day.” Home visits were particularly important in the case of women. A woman activist spoke of this as follows:

We visited women to talk about their problems. In these visits, we would talk about subjects that were important to women, such as birth control. We would also tell them about socialism. We tried to include them into social life. We wanted to bring women out to the streets, they were confined to their homes. At night, we stayed in their homes, just like one of them. (interview, 19.4.2008)

In the model of organization of the left in *gecekondu* areas, there would be a representative for each neighborhood, who would be a local youth in most cases, and some others around him/her. They would take care of residents, solving their daily problems, for example taking the sick to the hospital and carrying coal sacks to coal storage rooms. As they remembered it, Emin and his friend Ali started a debate, discussing the dilemmas they had while helping people in their everyday affairs: their socialist commitment would require them to be on the side of the people, but offering help could lead to people’s dependency. It could also harm their image as revolutionary. Emin said:

We wanted to help them. We approached them with a mentality of sharing. We carried their coal sacks on our backs. We took the sick to the hospital. We were the ones who would go to the municipality to demand for roads. When a roof blew off, we would go to fix it. In the People’s Houses, we would give courses to children. They were aware of our role in their lives. (interview, 25.5.2014)

He continued: “But helping them too much was wrong. Expecting everything from us. Taking for granted our help. We also did not want them to think of us as their servants in their service.”

The leftist presence in *gecekondu* neighborhoods also meant protection against demolition by the police and exploitation by the *gecekondu* mafia. In the words of Emin, the former activist in Keçikıran-Mamak: “The police would not dare to come into our neighborhood to demolish the houses. In our

presence, those who used to sell plots of state land to people would not dare to do so.” Moreover, militants would put pressure on the municipal government to bring services to the neighborhood. Emin continued: “We acted as a pressure group, making demands to the municipal government for bus lines and other services.” Contrary to what would be expected, negotiations would continue between the leftist groups and state authorities:

There was the rumor that the governor was a fascist, but he treated us well. He said, ‘People say you are communists, that you collect money from people for your own cause. But I know that you are good people. I know that you also give money [to build the school building]. I will help you [build the school building]. But, in return I want you to wipe the slogans off the walls.’

The help the activists offered to poor people when economic crises made their lives harder was in the memory of Coşkun, a Gültepe ex-militant in Izmir:

The bread prices increased suddenly. You know, those were the times of economic crises. The revolutionary youth, together with some people from the neighborhood organized a raid on the bakery, took the bread and distributed it to the people for free. After this, the bakery could not dare to raise the bread prices. We also obtained rice, oil and the like from the municipality’s market and distributed them to the people, making sure that it was done in a fair way. (interview, 17.1.2009)

As seen above, ideological conscious-raising activities of the militants interacted with their practice of solving everyday problems, which would help integrate people into the leftist project. This embeddedness of leftist mobilization in daily problems paved the path for the support of even those who were not ideologically committed to the leftist ideology. It is reflected in the following quotation by Coşkun, from Gültepe, İzmir: “Why would a 70-year-old woman participate in our resistance? Because it was the first time that some people cared for her, they made her feel like someone. The youth digging canals for the sewer and the like.” In the same vein, Ali from Keçikıran said, “A 70-year-old woman came with us to the municipality and joined the protestors to voice her demand for a public bus service to her neighborhood.” In Kayalar/Ertuğrul Karakaya, “those enlightened people, those conscious people” in Satı’s words, would care for the local people. They took Satı to hospital when she was going into labor for her first child.

The relationship between the goal of ideological transformation and the practice of helping to solve everyday problems is one theme to pursue. Accordingly, when I prompted the question of whether the alliance of *gecekondu* residents with the left in liberated areas was a pragmatic choice or a political commitment, Ali, one of the militants in Keçikıran, said, “In those days the majority of *gecekondu* people supported the left but they lacked political consciousness. They had come from the village and what they were looking for was a place to live and a job to

keep. When the leftist youth came to their neighborhood, most residents accepted them because they needed protection.”

The idea that *gecekondu* residents were politically unconscious in their support of the left was pursued by some others, which suggested the topdown nature of leftist intervention.³¹ Veli, the “organic intellectual”, explained it by their rural origins:

They were not political. They allied with the left because it was their first encounter with a political ideology.³² The left did not come to *gecekondu* areas as an ideology, as a political project. It was embraced by *gecekondu* people because they needed people with power who would take care of their needs. They were half peasants, half urbanites. They didn’t have anything to hold on except for equality. They had nothing, so they had to stand for equality. Ideologies are not something to be enforced; they are the product of conscious decisions. Yet, ideologies were brought into the lives of *gecekondu* people as something they should accept. Poor guys, they were not even primary school graduates.

The ideological frame of the project that resonated with the reality of the people is exemplified in the words of Cevdet in Ege:

We told them, ‘Your liberation will come with ending this system. We need to move to a system in which labor is at the center.’ In those times, they would care for the left. They would say, ‘We are the ones who work hard, we are the ones who serve for the military, and yet we are the ones who live from hand to mouth.’ They accepted our views.

To understand the extent of the topdown nature of the *gecekondu* project, I asked Emin, a former activist in Keçikıran-Mamak, whether the intervention of the left in *gecekondu* areas could be regarded as a social engineering project. His answer was a definite no: “We were living in *gecekondu* neighborhoods. We were not outsiders; we were the local people. There were only one or two revolutionaries who came from outside. How can this be social engineering?”

There were those who believed that, although the initial participation of *gecekondu* people in the leftist mobilization could be for pragmatic reasons, consciousness-raising events organized by the militants, as well as the experiences in the project – building the neighborhood collectively and defending the neighborhood collectively, transformed them into politically conscious subjects. This idea unfolds in the words of Cevat, in Ege: “Everybody was helping everybody else. When

³¹ Özgür Avcı (“The Making of a *Gecekondu* Identity: Journalistic Representations of the Squatters in Turkey in the 1970s.” *Journal of Urban History* 40 (2014): 211–231), based on his examination of news reports in the 1970s, argues that different political groups, namely, religious/nationalist right, center left, and radical left, were alike in their portrayal of *gecekondu* dwellers as a dubious group, devoid of ideological commitment.

³² In his discourse, Veli failed to recognize the support given by *gecekondu* dwellers for the Right in its ideology of improved lives and social mobility.

municipality laborers were digging canals, women from each household would prepare meals for them, taking turns. There was such an atmosphere of solidarity. Experiencing this kind of solidarity in everyday life was transforming people. They were getting rid of their egoism and reproducing the village *imece* (collective labor) in the city.”

The idea that living under threat and having violent confrontations with the police would produce consciousness against the status quo is seen in the Kayalar/Ertuğrul Karakaya and Ege neighborhoods. In the former, the experience of daily struggle with the *jandarma* while building the houses brought a life under threat, transforming people into resisting subjects. Zakir, the ex-militant and a resident, told me:

We would wait until midnight and start the constructions as soon as we saw the *jandarma* walk away after checking the area. We would place armed men inside the houses when we left the neighborhood to see a play and the like. The men would be on guard so that the *jandarma* would not burn or tear down our houses in our absence.

Once there was a police raid, which, Zakir claimed, was the result of a misunderstanding: “When the police came, the people, in their fear that they would demolish their houses, attacked the police. But they got it wrong. The police had not come for us, they were after the youth fighting nearby. When some youth ran towards our neighborhood, the police had followed them here.” It had devastating outcomes for the people: “When our people attacked the police, the police attacked back. They dragged women on the ground. The bruises made by police sticks remained on the backs of the women for some time. It was such a chaos. Then the riot police came and surrounded the neighborhood. They took with them ten men, nine of them from the people and one from us.”

When the foundation walls of the houses were completed, the *jandarma* sergeant appeared to stop the constructions. After some bargaining, they continued, which made them more cautious: “We started to sleep with our clothes on. Later we built a barricade at the entrance. Only then we felt safe.” The neighborhood was completed in 1977. During the event organized to celebrate its opening, some 500 policemen arrived to stop it. Zakir told them, “We are here to build houses for the poor,” but he was arrested.

Located in the vicinity of Tuzlucağır known as “the castle of the left,” Ege neighborhood was protected against the police intervention to stop the constructions. However, state authorities would attempt to make the lives of the people difficult, such as depositing garbage to the garbage dump in the area nearby. Women would actively resist it. A woman resident recalled: “The women of our neighborhood would stand in front of the garbage trucks (to prevent their entrance) shouting, ‘No garbage will come into our neighborhood.’”

In their commitment to their neighborhood, they would participate in the rallies organized to protest the city’s garbage dump in the neighborhood. Another woman talked with pride: “We (women) did many cut-ins on the traffic, we organized many rallies. We walked to the city hall to protest the garbage dumping site. We strived very much to make this place livable. We did it for the health of our children. Flies from the garbage site would block our view, we could not see through the windows.”

The Kayalar and Ege cases evidence the politicization of people as resistance subjects ready to fight the police to protect their homes. Several activists maintained the idea that migrant women from the village found the chance of moving out of their houses into the public realm as they participated in rallies and in the acts of defending their neighborhoods. These experiences would create solidarity. In the interviews, the women quoted above talked with nostalgia about the solidarity they once had in their community: “We constructed our own road by our political struggle. As a community, we had very strong ties. We were very close and connected.” They were now upset with the erosion of solidarity in their neighborhood.

The violent struggle against state interventions intensified as ultranationalists came into the urban periphery as a violent actor.

Towards the End: Ultranationalists in the Urban Periphery

Unprecedented violence erupted in 1979 when leftist mobilization was counteracted by ultranationalists who were organized as a strong counter-veiling force against “communists.” In the politicized and polarized society, *gecekondu* areas were fiercely contested between the rival groups armed with guns. The politics of disorder came to characterize *gecekondu* areas (Danielson and Keleş 1985). Fighting to take control of *gecekondu* neighborhoods, the two groups would paint their slogans on walls to show their territorial domination, which would be wiped off by the members of the opposing group to paint their own slogans. Fights with guns fired would take place between the two groups. In street fights, 27 persons were killed in 1974; 37 persons in 1975; 108 persons in 1976; 319 persons in 1977; 1095 persons in 1978; 1362 persons in 1979; and 2206 persons in 1980 (Danielson and Keleş 1985). It became dangerous for the leftist activists to invade land in those parts of the urban periphery controlled by ultranationalists. Ali narrated: “There was a vacant land overlooking a valley. We wanted to

distribute it to our people. But we had to travel through the neighborhood of fascists. It was very dangerous. But we succeeded and invaded the land.”

The violent confrontations between the “revolutionaries” and “ultranationalists” increasingly put their stamp on the everyday lives of *gecekondu* residents. It affected both Alevis and Sunnis, deepening the rift between the two groups. In the following, I summarize the experiences of the two groups in this violent moment in Turkish history, first the narrations of the Alevis, followed by those of the Sunnis. An Alevi man in Ege, described his experience: “We couldn’t turn the lights on. They (ultranationalists) would shoot, bang, bang. The ceilings of the houses were full of bullet holes. At night we wouldn’t sleep and take turns to protect our neighborhood against the armed intruders. They were *Kurtçular* (the local term for ultranationalists).” Men would take turns at nights to keep out the attacks of the ultranationalists. Women would bring food for their husbands on guard duty. University students would spend the night in *gecekondus* to protect families. In the words of a woman resident: “Our men slept with guns in their hands. Youth from the university came to stay in our houses.” Those who were not available for the guard duty because of their jobs or because they were in their villages during harvest time would give their house keys to the activists to stay in their homes. As Adem told me: “There would be some fifty keys given to us. People were saying, ‘Come stay in my place. Eat, sleep when I am away.’”

In a family living in Hüseyingazi, when the *jandarma* came to their house to make a search (the husband’s brother was a leftist militant), the wife hid the pistol that belonged to her brother-in-law in the swaddle of her baby. An Alevi woman from Yozgat, Nuriye, elaborated on her experience in her liberated neighborhood: “We helped them (the leftist youth) very much. We kept their guns; we gave them money. They protected us.” As the confrontations between the revolutionaries and the ultranationalists escalated, threatening the lives of *gecekondu* residents, Alevis increasingly sought protection from leftist groups. They were also increasingly engaged in acts of resistance and violence. Nuriye said: “We were burning tires to keep the fascists out.”

In the narratives of the Sunni respondents in Ege, one major issue was the oppression they experienced under the leftist control of their neighbourhood: “We could not get out of our houses. We could not even go to fetch water from the fountain. It was out of the question to visit the mosque [...] They [leftists] would curse at *ezan* (holy prayer), they would throw stones at the mosque”; “When we woke up for *sahur*,³³ we would place the gas lamp on the floor so that they would not see it. If they saw it, they would raid our house and take away our men.”

33 The meal eaten before dawn during the Ramadan.

Religious practices and the mosque were at the center of contestations. While Sunni residents complained about the insults made by leftists to the mosque, Alevi residents complained about the attacks on them from the mosque: “Our neighborhood was besieged by *Kurtçular* (ultranationalists), and people from the mosque shot at us.” Thus, the mosque came to signify, for the Sunnis, their oppression by the leftists, and for the Alevis, their historical oppression by Sunni Islam.

The leftist experiment with the *gecekondu* was ended violently by a military coup in 1980. Following the military coup, a mosque was built in the neighborhood despite the fact that, as an Alevi resident put it: “We have nothing to do with mosques.” One of the leftist leaders of the 1970s also said: “We were sure that a mosque could never be built in our neighborhood, it would always be free of mosques. Yet, right after the 1980 military takeover, they (Sunni neighbors) built this mosque (in 1981) to defy us.” A new era started for Turkey in which leftist ideology and praxis lost its power in society. It was part of a larger transformation in the world as the former Soviet Union collapsed and neoliberalism at the global scale became the dominant political economic system. When the new political regime introduced Islam as the binding force, the possibility of a leftist revolution from the *gecekondu* was lost, as if there was ever such a possibility, and “liberated territories” became an era of exception of the past.

Conclusion

Using the narratives of ex-militants and *gecekondu* inhabitants, I aimed to trace the experience of the intervention of the left in the urban periphery to produce “liberated neighborhoods”. I provided information on to what extent and in what ways leftist activists transformed the urban periphery, both physically and ideologically, as they invaded and distributed state land to poor people and moved into *gecekondu* neighborhoods to “educate” their dwellers for class consciousness. I demonstrated the challenges the activists faced in transforming space and people, fighting against the *gecekondu* mafia and the state’s security forces, as well as fighting for creating a working-class from rural migrants with conservative values. I also demonstrated the ways of coping with the challenges that included using violence as well as negotiating with state actors. I also discussed the role of sectarian differences (Alevi/Sunni) in people’s participation in the project, suggesting that the minority position of Alevis in the Sunni-dominated society and the discrimination they faced led them to position themselves against the status quo.

One of my main conclusions is about the varied practices and views of the left in different contexts. I argue that leftist activism in *gecekondu* areas was not the result of a centrally organized project planned ahead; it was not a fully-blown project with clear goals and practices. Although leftist activists from the very beginning had the motive to transform the urban poor into political subjects conscious of their interests shaped by their class positions, their actions were spontaneous and fragmented, evolving differently in different contexts. The other conclusion is about the question of whether it was a topdown project. The labor invested by the leftist youth in the project, both physical and social, creating housing areas in the urban periphery in which the use value is prioritized over the exchange value, and creating class consciousness in the urban poor, is well-evidenced. Accordingly, I argue that although the project, with the goal of educating the urban poor for awareness about their exploitation in the capitalist system, can be considered a topdown endeavor as leftist activists attempted to inscribe their ideology into the lives and minds of the people, the hard work they put to build neighborhoods collectively with the people and to provide them access to services makes the project participatory in practical terms.

The actions of the leftist activists had concrete spatial and political outcomes. They played a significant role as they entered the urban periphery as a new actor, regulating informal housing areas under their control and changing the power dynamics in the urban periphery in favor of those who supported them. As they gave people land to build their houses, they ironically gave them the potential for rent appropriation. The introduction of the exchange value into *gecekondu* areas by a series of laws enacted during the government elected in the aftermath of the military coup turned the leftist project upside down. It furthered the failure of the project in ideological terms when poor *gecekondu* residents became the owners of several apartments. Today, *gecekondu* areas are transformed by small-scale developers (*müteahhit*) since the 1980s, and the partnerships TOKI (Toplu Konut İdaresi/Mass Housing Administration) forms with municipal governments in urban transformation projects (*kentsel dönüşüm projeleri*) since the 2000s. Through the transformation projects, value is extracted from the *gecekondu* land at mass scale, which is unequally distributed among the actors, the central and local governments, along with large-scale construction companies appropriating the rent more than ever. It carries the potential of collective resistance against the projects. Yet, only a few neighborhoods, such as Küçükarmutlu (Sarıyer) and Gülsuyu-Gülensu (Maltepe) in Istanbul, and Dikmen Valley in Ankara, resist it, while bargaining with authorities for compensations is the strategy of *gecekondu* residents in other sites of transformation. Compared to studies that investigated the role of leftist groups in the transformation of the urban periphery, research on urban transformation projects is abundant, which brings a

critical perspective using the explanatory framework of neoliberalism. As the transformation of the *gecekondu* land as a commodity captures the attention of academics today, it makes this article all the more important for showing the previous struggle over the transformation of the urban periphery by prioritizing the use value of housing. And as the poor are pulled into consumerism by the desire created in neoliberalism, this article again gains importance as it sheds light on the previous attempts to transform the urban poor into political subjects that are conscious of their exploitation in the capitalist system.

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