

The association of urban planners in Turkey in neo-liberal era: The example of Ankara

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Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa é evidenciar a importância da Associação de Urbanistas na Turquia, com ênfase especial em Ancara. Uma vez que não lhe é permitido que faça parte da governança enquanto parte interessada por administradores e investidores locais, esta Associação desempenha um papel importante para proteger o termo lefebvriano "direito à cidade". Embora as políticas urbanas neoliberais afetem negativamente os moradores das cidades, estes são altamente dependentes das Associações para lutar contra tais políticas. O papel destas é ainda mais proeminente quando falta uma oposição organizada na sociedade e uma consciência pública, como acontece na Turquia. A Associação tenta enfrentar os impactos negativos das políticas urbanas que são determinadas e implementadas pelos atuais administradores municipais, acionistas e empreiteiros em Ancara. Neste sentido, procura-se encontrar uma maneira de participar no processo de urbanização. Na maioria dos casos, tal envolve procedimentos negativos, como a crítica às políticas e a participação em ações judiciais. Apesar de seus esforços, não é muito fácil atingir estes objetivos sem a participação ativa dos cidadãos e sem um contexto conveniente para o fazer. A pesquisa sobre a Associação dos urbanistas e a entrevista realizada com o diretor da delegação de Ancara desta Associação sustenta o argumento apresentado acima.

Palavras-Chave

Direito à Cidade, Governança, Associação de Urbanistas, Ancara

Abstract

The aim of this research is to put forth the importance of the Association of Urban Planners in Turkey with special emphasis to Ankara. Not allowed to be a part of governance as stakeholders by local administrators and investors, they play an important role for protecting the Lefebvrian term 'the right to the city'. Although neoliberal urban policies negatively affect city dwellers, they are highly dependent on the Associations to fight against them. Their role is more prominent when there is a lack of organized opposition in the society and public consciousness as in Turkey.

The Association tries to put an end to the negative impacts of urban policies determined and implemented by current municipality administrators, shareholders and building contractors in Ankara. They try to do their best to find a way to take part in urbanisation process. Most of the cases, they involve in a negative proceedings by criticizing policies and bringing lawsuits. In spite of their efforts, it is not too easy to achieve the goals without active participation of citizens and convenient environment to do so. The research on the Association of Urban Planners and the interview conducted with the Director of the Ankara branch of this Association support the argument stated above.

Keywords

The right to the city, Governance, The Association of Urban Planners, Ankara

Introduction

Neoliberal urban policies contain not only spatial but also social dimension. This makes necessary all parts in the society participate in policy making process for defending the right to the

city, the term which is highly related to governance understanding. According to this understanding, decisions about city should be made in a participatory manner and different parties living in the city should take part in the process.

Although since 1990s governance in adminis-

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tration has gained importance and has been accepted by many, it has not been really actualized in every country. Turkey with the lack of democratic institutions in real terms, pass through a painful process of neoliberalism. While cities are shaped in accordance with the interests of capitalists, the needs of the real users of the city are neglected. In order to make decisions in favor of city dwellers who are not regarded in the process, there is a need for politicized organizations. In Turkey, the struggle for the right to the city is highly dependent on the Associations, since they are the most powerful opposition to the neoliberal urban policies for protecting the right of the city dwellers.

The argument of this study is that the Association of Urban Planners plays an important role against neoliberal policies, especially, through negative participation, since the society as a whole is not encouraged to take part in policy making process in Turkey. They try to protect the right to the city of the majority by bringing lawsuits against urban plans, fighting in the fields and organizing academic, scientific meetings and competitions for creating liveable urban space and a healthy society. However, it is necessary to admit that these efforts are condemned to be ineffective without the support of city dwellers. In fact, this is the reason for all these efforts made by the Association being ineffective in the presence of local administrators and investors.

In order to show what kind of a role is played by the Associations, it is necessary to mention the status of the Association of Urban Planners in Turkey. After giving this information, examples of the struggle given by the Association of the Urban Planners are referred. For that purpose, newspapers and lawsuits were searched for. Moreover, an interview was conducted with the Director of the Association of Urban Planners Ankara section. Another attempt of the current study is to touch upon what kind of difficulties the Association of Urban Planners faces. It is obvious that the findings of the study support the central argument stated above, as expected.

City under neoliberal era and the right to the city

Since 1970s, neoliberal view and capitalism have been determining urban policies. Urban space is shaped and reshaped in order to fulfill the needs of capitalism. The reason for that is “a general consensus emerging throughout the advanced capitalist world that positive benefits are to be

had by cities taking an entrepreneurial stance to economic development” (Harvey, 2007, p. 347). As a result, cities became the victims of unbreakable capitalist development for converting the capital into investment. Under the light of these developments, one can claim that construction sector, especially restaurants, shopping malls, international fairgrounds and large infrastructure projects such as dams and highways are all the mediators for the absorption of surplus (Vives Miró, 2011).

While the role played by cities has changed immensely, it has been criticized by some scholars. Although they have differences in their approach towards urban issues, critical urban theorists such as Lefebvre, Harvey and Castells have the common understanding that cities are no more than operating as strategic sites where commodification processes take place, since cities, themselves, turned into commodities (Brenner and Marcuse, 2012).

By admitting capitalism’s dependence on space, Lefebvre (1991) claims each mode of production produces its own space, and capitalism does the same for a capitalist surplus. This type of production of urban space is an important tool for reproduction of capitalist social relations. While urban space, itself, has become a production that serves for the interest of capital, thanks to this exploration of urban space, capitalism ensures its continuity.

This process continues with the changes in relations between local and national governments. As a result of the prevalence of neoliberal order, states have lost their domination over urbanization, environment, culture, history and architectural values (Keleş, 2013). With the effect of globalization ideals and international cooperation rules, cities have been assigned important roles. These roles are planned to be played by local actors, with the effect of changing understanding in city ruling which is named as governance.

Under the governance understanding, decisions should be made with the participation of local governments, capitalists and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, in reality, it “has often been the prerogative of the local Chamber of Commerce, some cabal of local financiers, industrialists and merchants, or some ‘round table’ of business leaders and real-estate and property developers.” (Harvey, 2007, p. 351). Local governments also play crucial role by being responsible to create infrastructure for production, circulation, exchange and consumption relations (Şengül, 2001). Neil Brenner and his colleagues support this idea as well by asserting [in a neoliberal era] state and ur-

ban planning play critical role in the transformation of urban space (Brenner and Marcuse, 2012).

However, the problem is that such kind of an association cannot respond the needs of city dwellers. In contrast, it intensifies injustices in the city. It is necessary that this association should be broken, and this can be only realized through struggles giving in an organized manner (Şengül, 2008). Moreover, in order for an urban strategy to be effective, it should stand for political power. This strategy cannot take an action on its own without it (Şengül, 2001).

At this point, a highly important role falls to urbanists in order to organize and politicize the struggle. Lefebvre (2016) declares that urbanists are “space doctors” and they should know to distinguish healthy spaces from unhealthy ones. Their function is to grant qualifications associated to healthy spaces to the urban space.

At this point, one can ask how urbanists can touch the issue and what kind of contributions can be made by these ‘space doctors’. The most prominent contribution of urban planners is their struggle for the benefit of city dwellers who favor the use value of urban land. They demand liveable and qualified spaces that are far from exchange value and profit making. By fighting against capitalist understanding of the city and making policies accordingly, urbanists can protect the city dwellers’ right to the city.

Lefebvre (1995, p. 34) explains the right to the city as the following:

“The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban citizen and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck in ghettos.”

Right to the city, in a sense, is the design of the city according to the desires and needs of the city dwellers. This shows the importance of urbanists once again because this right to the city necessitates the collective action and politicization. Nevertheless, society itself seems to be far from collectivity and those who can bring them together to fight are the urbanists.

The struggle of the urban planners

Turkey has started to feel the immense effects of neoliberalism in various fields. Especially in local administration, there was a shift from social municipality approach to merchant municipality understanding¹. This shift has influenced the boundaries of right to the city. David Harvey (2012) argues the boundaries of right to the city is too narrowly confined in today’s world and city is shaped by very few political and economic elites in line with their own interest. An alliance is easily forged by bankers, developers and construction companies, the true beneficiaries of the state subsidiaries are again these people.

Despite his opinion of the right to the city should rise up from streets, instead of being arisen out of intellectual fascinations (Harvey, 2012), in countries such as Turkey where citizens do not actively participate in decision making, organized structures can and should play a critical role to protect the right to the city.

According to Akkoyunlu Ertan (2014), in Turkey, the future of the city is up to those who hold power in their hands, while the city dwellers as the real owners of the city are neglected in decision making. The idea also is supported by Kuban who refers to the concept of ‘planning real’. Invented in the United Kingdom, this term reflects the democratic structure of the society requires active participation of people in the planning process. Turkey cannot realize it due to its undemocratic administrative tradition since Ottoman Empire (Kuban, 2011).

Considering the lack of city dwellers who are politically active and organized, this gap is tried to be filled by the Association of Architects and the Association of Urban Planners. Nevertheless, most of the time, they cannot find the opportunity to raise their voice in the planning process and cities are not shaped according to their design. Although the most important responsibility of architects and urban planners is not to be used as a tool for unscientific and speculative programmes (Kuban and İncedayı, 2006), there are many professionals who act oppositely. Power holders support these professionals, since they are not against to implement the power holders’ plans (Kuban and İncedayı, 2006). Hence, an important contribution of urbanists against neo-liberal urbanism does not occur as an active participation. On the contrary, they are taking part in the processes through negative participation by filing a claim and declaring counter-view.

Association of Urban Planners in Turkey is a professional organization with public institution

status and they have public legal personality according to the Constitution. They are different from civil society organizations, since they are not out of administration. In fact, these organizations are regarded as a part of administration by being assigned two duties: monitoring public institutions on behalf of public and regulating the relations among colleagues.

In order to understand how Associations approach towards urbanization practices in Turkey, especially in Ankara, it is important to give information about recent urbanization process there. Despite the attempts and investments in order for converting İstanbul into the most favorite city, Ankara protects its own importance as the capital. However, for 10-20 years, there have been attacks to it by undercutting the values that make Ankara prominent. On the one hand Ankara has undergone the same urbanization process with other cities in Turkey. On the other hand, it is losing its prominence and the ideological dimension as the capital of the Republic.

What is seen in today's Ankara is the immense impacts of the construction-based economy as any other cities. There are many luxurious buildings and consumption centers in various parts of the city. In addition, there are different types of interventions. Most notable one is related to Atatürk Forest Farm. On the farm, there is a thematic park, Ankapark, under construction. By spreading approximately 1.200.000m², it will be one of the biggest thematic parks in the World. It is located on Atatürk Forest Farm which dates back to 1920s with its founding philosophy to create cultivated and recreation area as stated in its establishment law. According to the law, on this area, there cannot be any structure with commercial or industrial purposes.

Ankara Metropolitan Municipality prepared a Conservation Development Plan and Implementation Plan for building that park on this area and that was brought to trial by the Association of Urban Planners and the Association of Architects. Court consulted for an expert opinion and experts submitted a report to the court. According to the report, this area should be a cultivated one and, in the plans, this qualification should have taken into consideration. In other words, experts claim that the plan constituting a base for Ankapark is illegal. Associations declare Ankapark Project aims at creating a profit-oriented area which neglects public interest and it cannot fulfil citizens' needs for green, natural and liveable places. It was also contradictory with original will of its creators to establish a forest-farm. Their assertion, in a sense, is support-

ed legally. However, metropolitan municipality does not care about the court decision and tries to find a way to complete the construction.

Nowadays, the new urban agenda is the Metropolitan Municipality's efforts for transformation of Ulus historical city center for displacing small tradesmen in return for building huge trade complex. In press, there has been news about new investments and transformation in Ulus. It is the central part of the city before Turkish Republic and still it has commercial functions. In 2014, Ankara Metropolitan Municipal Council approved Ulus Historical City Center Conservation Development Plan, which allows structuring without any research on this site. The plan also consists decisions that can break the traditional texture.

In 2015, after plan's enforcement, mayor announced that Ulus Bazaar, Anafartalar Bazaar and 100. Yıl Bazaar would be pulled down and a new square that is approximately 30.000 m² would be built. There is no clear information about why this new square is planned to be so huge, while the current one is 2250 m². More importantly, this project was not stated in the plan. The Association resorted to the jurisdiction and upon this objection, Ankara 7th Administrative Court cancelled the Conservation Development Plan. Nevertheless, it is easy to expect Ulus will be transformed under the rules of neoliberal urbanization, despite the efforts of the Associations.

In order to find out how the Associations fight against these interventions and what kind of difficulties they face; an interview was conducted with the Director of Chambers of Urban Planners Ankara section. As claimed by him, like other cities in Turkey, Ankara has become a victim of neoliberal understanding of the city. According to him, despite destructive effects of neoliberal urbanization, city dwellers are not interested in issues about their city. However, it is not fair to blame them because of this, due to two reasons. First, urban interventions happen as a fragmented manner. In order for dwellers raise their voice, the intervention should have been made on the space that they use, and they should be affected negatively. Second, macro politics in Turkey changes every day, so people cannot follow what is happening in their city.

As he adds, in this conjuncture, it is impossible to expect from political parties to participate urban opposition, because they are in the same boat with investors. This implies the fact that, in order to create opposition and politicize the urban issue, we are in need to stand for Professional As-

sociations. However, as the Director told, views of the Association are not taken into consideration by municipality, since request for an opinion and expression of that opinion extends the planning and building processes. Thus, negative participatory methods play more prominent roles.

Associations try to mould public opinion and increase public sensitiveness through popularization. They are somehow successful in that, because they have more opportunities to be visible. The interviewee says personally his main motivation is to influence public opposition. However, this is highly related to public consciousness. Moreover, popularization is not enough, and it is necessary to be localized, because dwellers cannot understand technical issues and chambers should try to inform and organize them. In addition, it is not too easy to have a common sense since local interests can vary in some cases: one person can demand transformation, while other opposes.

Furthermore, they prepare academic meetings and press declarations. What they do in all these cases is exposition that is the very first and really critical step towards achieving right to the city as asserted by Marcuse (2012).

If one searches other methods used by the Associations, applying to the judicial process is the most important one. As interviewee explained, they are highly successful in gaining lawsuits. Nevertheless, most of the time, their attempts go for nothing due to judicial process. As construction process is too fast and judicial process is really slow, destructive and irreversible effects of construction occur, even if Association succeeds in an action. In some cases, even if expert opinion is in favor, court can decide in an opposite way based on political and economic relations.

Conclusion

While protected areas are structured, green areas are destroyed and planlessness is dominated, only an organized power can resist all these interventions. The Association of Urban Planners and the Association of Architects by being in the same line as opposed to neoliberal urbanization process do their own part towards transformation of urban space into healthy one. Nevertheless, architects and urban planners cannot show extraordinary attempt in a society that they live in, despite being the most important organized power, as Kuban (2011) claims.

Considering all these dimensions of the neo-liberal urbanization, city dwellers should be aware of how dangerous current urban devel-

opment is and be active in order to protect their city. Each step towards fulfilling the needs of neoliberalism will pose a threat to them. As the majority, they have the right to city and the right raise our voice to shape it accordingly. Without active participation of city dwellers, all these attempts will be ineffective. For that purpose, it is important to create an environment to encourage public participation.

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