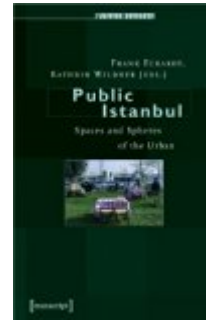


Frank Eckardt, Kathrin Wildner. *Public Istanbul: Spaces and Spheres of the Urban.* Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2008. 352 S. \$52.95, paper, ISBN 978-3-89942-865-0.



Reviewed by Luisa Piart

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This collection of essays titled: “Public Istanbul. Spaces and Spheres of the Urban” seeks to offer insights into the “multi-dimensionality of urban public space in Istanbul” (p. 9). It is the outcome of a conference that took place in Bauhaus Weimar University in January 2007 which saw a coming together of Turkish and German scientists from diverse disciplines ranging from history and ethnography to architecture and urban planning. Editors Frank Eckardt and Kathrin Wildner attempt to “initiate an interdisciplinary discussion with theoretical approaches and case studies on Istanbul.” (p. 8). The project is based on two assumptions: the scarcity of research on the urban transformations taking place in Istanbul, and the new significance of what is named “public spaces” in the megacity at the Bosphorus. Frank Eckardt and Kathrin Wildner maintain that in the last two decades, globalization and the exponential demographic and geographical growth of Istanbul “has resulted in the establishment of new patterns in cross border public encounters.” (p. 15).

In the existent literature there is a lack of precise data on today’s Istanbul. The book should be

praised for trying to fill this gap. The fourteen articles look at new uses or new spaces of the ‘public’ in Istanbul. They focus either on people (especially migrants), or on places and areas (for example, the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus, or the French Street). Some of the themes taken up are part of the scholarly literature on the study of megacities: gated communities (Orhan Esen/Tom Rienets), shantytowns (Sevil Alkan), gentrification, or urban regeneration projects and their specific forms (Eda Ünlü-Yücesoy, Funda Baş-Bütün, Senem Zeybekoğlu, Asu Aksoy, Susanne Prehl). Other articles look at the more uncommon: for example, Ela Alanyalı-Aral is interested in spaces along urban motorways and Feride Çiçekoğlu analyses the construction of ‘public Istanbul’ through a famous female movie character of the 1960s. This combination could have been quite challenging if the articles would provide a more coherent perspective on the topic. Although the editors state that “the concept of “public space” derives from theoretical and empirical considerations which neglect the multifaceted dimensions of cities like Istanbul’ (p. 17), the inaccuracy of previous definitions – from Jürgen Habermas,

Hannah Arendt or Richard Sennett – is not sharpened. Thus, the different articles tend to be repetitive or inconsistent in the way the concept of “public space” is defined, or used.

Nonetheless, some articles make valuable contributions to the understanding of the ‘public’ in Istanbul. In what follows, three of these articles are summarized. Florian Riedler’s study focuses on temporary labor migrants in nineteenth century Istanbul and their belonging to the public and the private domains. He questions the supposedly “enforced separation of the temporary workers from the city’s population” (p. 236). Using empirical evidence gleaned from the Ottoman archives, he argues that this separation remained an ideal, expressing a desire to keep the city ‘in order’. Indeed, the migrants were usually single men and their dwelling was potentially disturbing the segregation between private/female and public/male spaces: “As strangers to the city, at least in theory, temporary migrants had to be kept away from the “private world” of the “mahalle”.” (p. 240). However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the ‘public’ – understood here as a sphere and a space of sociability – acquired a new meaning in Ottoman Istanbul. On the one hand, some temporary migrants settled and constituted new ‘publics’, while at the same time, under Western influence, new spaces of sociability emerged (e.g. mason-lodges, theatres, or new-style cafés). The migrants were excluded from these places, but fashioned their own, based on their regional origins: notably, coffeehouses and ‘kiraathane’ (reading rooms). These spaces symbolized a new kind of participation in society. The author convincingly links these changes with the development of nationalism. Here the question touched upon is whether the ‘public’ was always reshaped throughout history, or whether this is something more specific to Modernity.

Feride Çiçekoğlu deals with cinematographic representations of the metropolis. She offers the reader a pleasant journey through the narrative

of the famous Turkish movie ‘Vesikalı Yarım’ (‘My Licensed Beloved’, from the director Lütü Ömer Akad 1968). The main female lead is the prostitute Sabiha (played by Türkan Şoray). Çiçekoğlu contends that Sabiha “marks a turning point in the portrayal of women in public Istanbul” (p. 321). The movie builds up a gendered cartography of Istanbul with the help of the concepts of center/periphery and exterior/interior. Halil – Sabiha’s lover – lives at the periphery of the city, while Sabiha lives in the central entertainment district of Beyoğlu. The peripheral fringe is furthermore associated with “the realm of the familiar” and on the contrary the center, with being modern (p. 322). “Sabiha’s [short] transformation from a prostitute to a housewife” – when she moves in with Halil – materializes the interior/exterior duality (p. 324). In the end, the couple breaks up and “Halil is excluded from “public Istanbul”” (p. 327). Sabiha goes back to the heart of the city in a subversive attitude which implies that she will resume her previous activity. In the final part of the article, the reader’s attention is drawn to Sabiha’s more determined character in contrast to female characters in contemporary European movies. The author concludes that “the public visibility of women in the city is an essential dimension of urban analysis” that has to be further researched (p. 331).

Like the majority of the contributors to this volume, Asu Aksoy elaborates on a topic from today’s Istanbul. She is interested in public culture and its “turn toward greater openness and interconnectedness” that she conceptualizes in terms of “worldliness” (p. 226). She examines both the “urban regeneration policy of the present AKP government” and the “recent city-branding activities by the top business elites of the country” (p. 217). Gated communities, commercial malls, and central business districts: new urban gentrifying projects are burgeoning. All this takes place against the background of massive public land’s sales that reflect current mechanisms of globalization in Istanbul (p. 219). She focuses on the switch

in the policy and rhetoric of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). Aksoy argues that gentrifying projects bring the AKP into closer ties with economic elites, while at the same time moving it away from the “urban poor” that initially brought the party to power (p. 217). The author underlines the cultural dimensions of these new policy and development projects. They bring about a physical and symbolic cleansing of the city and showcase the desire and need of the AKP “to use Istanbul as a stage to demonstrate their modernity and globalism” (p. 217). What concerns the author is the ambiguity of this strategy. She insists on the “precariousness of the culture of openness” (p. 218) and turns attention to the dangers that this development potentially holds: anger, frustration, and social unrest.

“Public Istanbul” mirrors the diversity of topics that awaken the interests of researchers studying Istanbul. See Orhan Esen, Stephen Lanz (eds.), *Self Service City. Istanbul*, Berlin 2005. . Many articles present preliminary theoretical or empirical results of ongoing research projects. In this, the quality of the contributions is quite diverse. In some articles, the sources of information are unclear and even disconnected from the research topic. In others, an adequate proof-reading of the English would have facilitated the reader’s comprehension. Diversity – of quality, topics, and methodology – is thus the impression that the reader is left with, and this is not counter-balanced by a strong theoretical guiding line. The book remains a loose collection of articles, rather than a collective volume with a unifying theme. For a counter-example, see Diane Singerman, Paul Amar (eds.), *Cairo Cosmopolitan. Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, Cairo 2006. . In this respect, it is symptomatic that the articles are not presented individually in the introduction. Furthermore the articles engage issues that have been hotly debated in Turkey such as migration, gated communities, and squatter areas. See, for instance, Tahire Erman, *The Politics of Squatter (Gecekondu) Studies in Turkey*.

The Changing Representations of Rural Migrants in the Academic Discourse, in: *Urban Studies* 38(2001)7, p. 983-1002. . But too many articles do not take a stand, and even ignore recent discussions. More generally, the volume lacks a critical distance from its subject and most contributions are pervaded by moral and political judgments that are taken for granted rather than questioned.

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