In(formal) Housing and the State in Times of Neoliberal Politics: The Case of Low-Income Settlements in Turkey

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This essay addresses the impacts of neoliberal policies on urban politics, which have started to be implemented after the military intervention of the 1980s in Turkey. This examination is substantiated by a close reading of the changing context of socio-spatial dynamics in low-income settlements. With regard to informal settlements, these policies initiated a legal act of formalization and integration of these districts to cities via reformation of the local government system towards decentralization. This reformation also lent greater authority to district municipalities. However, these policies aiming originally at the integration of peripheral informal settlements into urban land market -when coupled with macro highly liberal economic and fragmentary identity policies- led to certain unintended consequences in socio-spatial terms. To reflect on these unintended consequences will provide means to reconsider the conventional definitions of formality and informality regarding low-income settlements and migrants' existence in the city.

First of all, the political act of the formalization of the housing status in once informal settlements has not necessarily carried the socio-spatial relations and dynamics in these settlements to a totally formal context in the last two decades. On the contrary, the neo-liberalized context of local politics led to the empowered presence and resistance of certain identity groups who are actively shaping the course of social spatialization in these localities by informal means embedded in "formal" politics and planning.

Secondly, the political act of the pacification of leftist politics by breaking up the trust relation between migrants by the military regime has given a great damage to the self-organizational capacity of migrants to act as a neighborhood community in demanding services from the politicians. The traditional practice of clientelist politics via the patronage of local community leaders has been replaced by a novel form of clientelism in a neoliberal context where the political bargainers or mediators are involved in political party structures on the vertical/formal level as they are connected to migrant-communities via ethnic identity on the horizontal/informal level. The identity policies in the 1990s which emphasize the *Sünni*-interpretation of Islam as the dominant interpretation and acknowledge a legitimate space for informal *Sünni*-practices in public space, led to the operation of local politics, mainly around sectarian division between *Alevism* and *Sünnism*[2]. In this respect, the process of getting title deeds for houses with best possible conditions, demanding public services for the immediate locality and constructing religious places, constitute a matter for nepotistic concerns and become a subject of competition between *Alevi* and *Sünni hemşehri*[3] communities in localities through informal means of politics. Thirdly, with further liberalization of economy and increasing privatization of welfare services, the migrants who had migrated to the city (particularly in the neoliberal context of the 1990s), faced extreme poverty and a more permanent form of deprivation with regard to housing and services. In the transformed context of local and national politics mentioned above, those migrant families who do not have the means to make use of informal connections are to a large extent marginalized from formal politics. Particularly the domination of pro-Islamist conservative political parties in local politics by the mid-1990s has brought the synthesis between informal and philanthropic ways of dealing with the poor on one side and

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[2] There are two main sectarian divides in Turkey that are *Alevism* and *Sünnism*. The practices of *Alevism* greatly differ from the *Sünni* Islamic practices. Prayer (*namaz*), the fast in Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca and zakat that are binding duties of *Sünni* Islam are either not practiced by *Alevi* groups or practiced in different ways and times. *Alevis* have their own practices like ceremonial meeting namely *Cem*. The ceremony is conducted in the place called *Cemevi* meaning Cem House. Alevis often built this place as to be used specifically for *Cem* ceremonies. The interpersonal relations within the community; their survival with mutual respect and appreciating good humane characteristics like, tolerance, equality and freedom constitute the backbone of *Alevi* ethical system. Before the 1950s where *Alevi* and *Sünni* people mostly lived in villages of their own, these identities had not let to any conflict-ridden situation between groups. However, after the 1950s with the intense rural-to-urban migration these identities came into close contact in informal settlements constructed in the periphery of the cities.

[3] "*Hemşehri*" refers to the people of the same hometown. Mostly *hemşehri* is used in daily life among migrants to denote the people of the same village or the same province.

the state's further abandonment from welfare duties on the other. The migrants who are excluded from the possibilities of formal welfare service provision, look for informal means to be considered "eligible for help" in order to utilize the benefits of philanthropic politics. This situation generally contributed to the sufferings of the poorest and "ethnically other" sections of the low-income settlers.

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