



Rethinking Neoliberal Urbanization through the Lens of Sulukule, Istanbul

Melis OĞUZ, PhD. Student
Istanbul Technical University, Turkey
meloguz@gmail.com

Evren TOK, PhD. Student
Carleton University, Canada
etok@connect.carleton.ca

What we have been observing in the neoliberal times is a change in the meaning as well as a transformation in the character and conceptual blurring of neoliberalism. This paper aims at portraying the affinity and the interrelation between the diffusion of neoliberal ideas and chang-ed/-ing and transform-ed/-ing nature of urban space. A critical engagement with the concepts of regeneration /gentrification and their overlap with neoliberalism demonstrate how the neoliberal mindset privilege the centrality of and transform the urban space through the market mentality. The concepts of gentrification and regeneration constitute the key terrain to diagnose the strength of the neoliberal discourse as well as deciphering the oppositions that limit the penetration of neoliberal policies.

Today, the concept of gentrification refers to rehierarchization, reshuffling and restructuring of certain interests and actors, and emergence of new parties in accordance to the changes in the rules of the game that took place beyond the control of the neighborhood scale. The changing rules of the game involve power asymmetries; both winners and losers. Certain actors are privileged and the very nature of spatial arrangements, bargains and negotiations do not let some social groups and individuals to defend their interests. Not surprisingly, these resonate well with neoliberal strategies and tactics that manifest them with different generic names and sounds like a victory for the neoliberal ideology.

The case of Sulukule has been a representative case in the Turkish context, especially when the urban and metropolitan transformation of Istanbul is taken into account. The way neighborhoods transform and serve the interests of the market and the capital is similar to the historical functioning of capitalism. Thus, the globalization of gentrification arguments made in the literature should not surprise us given that it is a neoliberal strategy to extract value whenever and wherever possible, in the form of gentrification aiming to revalorize usually decayed spaces or slum areas.

As a neighborhood manifestation of neoliberalism, gentrification no longer resides within the boundaries of the local scale. The hollowing out of the nation state and transferring of capacities and responsibilities to sub-national scales brought tension, as well as new opportunities for local governments. They had to make better use the spatial opportunities by cooperating with the capitalists, real estate developers, planners and designers to make their neighborhood, city or urban context as attractive as possible.

Also in Sulukule, the re-generation project aims to turn this old Gypsy neighborhood into an attractive and sanitized area. A great many number of academics, professionals, and representatives of NGOs and community groups view these decisions as a blatant injustice. None of the residents have been called to participate in the decision-making process, and most of them are left out of negotiations. Authorities did not hesitate to push away Gypsies, who are "persona non grata" anyway. What is aimed in this paper is to reveal that the purpose of such urban projects is to pave the way for bigger neoliberal businesses.

KEY WORDS: Urban regeneration, gentrification, neoliberal urbanization, neoliberalism.