To what extent urban social movements function as politicization processes for its participants

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Abstract: This paper examines to what extent urban social movements lead to politicize their participants. This question is even more important due to the urban character of the current global economic crisis triggered by the last forty years of neoliberal policies. This research is based on a recently completed qualitative investigation into the struggle of a squatter neighborhood in Dikmen Valley. Dikmen Valley is a neighborhood in central Ankara, Turkey, that has been struggling since 2006 against displacement by an urban regeneration project. In order to examine the politicizing effects of the struggle on the residents, it focuses on current discussions of two of Lefebvre’s influential notions: “the right to the city” and “encounters.” This analysis shows that, along with the powerful discourse on rights, the encounters experienced by the neighborhood’s residents during their struggle have led to the reestablishment of the neighborhood’s identity, to new social relations in Dikmen Valley and beyond, to the politicization of its residents. On the other hand, it is worth to discuss to what extent this politicization comes to fruition by examining the demands of the struggle and difference between their discourse and the negotiations with the institutions.

Key Words: neoliberal urbanism, urban regeneration, right to the city, encounters, politicization, Dikmen Valley, Ankara, Turkey

Introduction

Since the 1970s cities have been converted into a means of accumulation. This epoch is generally called “neoliberal”. Neoliberalization is a process of commodification that leads to the intensification of uneven development across places, territories and scales (Brenner et. al., 2012). Harvey stresses that “accumulation by dispossession” becomes the main mode of accumulation during the neoliberal epoch of the capitalist system. Lefebvre (2009) points out capitalism’s shift from production in space to the production of space itself in and through the process of capitalist development. Merrifield eloquently described this phenomenon: “The link between economic growth and the urban process assumes an inextricable unity” (2002: 76).

This is the context in which urban regeneration projects have become highly operative. The Dikmen Valley Regeneration Project is one of the first attempts in Turkey to achieve economic growth by speculation. Not surprisingly, since then contestations against these processes of dispossession have flared up in many neighborhoods. Dikmen Valley’s resistance has been exemplary. It can be described as evolving from a resistance against displacement to a struggle for the right to shelter or as a resistance that evolved into an urban social political movement. As Marx (quoted by Merrifield, 2007) put it so well; social struggles are at the same
time existential voyages. Dikmen Valley’s case is a good example of this. It would be fair to admit that this resistance came into being due to Dikmen Valley’s residents’ lack of economic means. If displaced, most of them could not afford to pay rent even in the city’s periphery. They were left with only two options: resisting or living on the street. Those who left the neighborhood because of fear, despite their lack of economic means, have suffered from severe economic, psychological and family problems.

The discourse that dominates the case of Dikmen Valley is mainly based on the concept of the ‘right to shelter’ and has been expanded to a kind of ‘rights struggle’ including the rights to education, to health, to transportation and so on. Here it is crucial to refer to Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city.” This concept has been widely used in a variety of milieus ranging from the umbrella organizations of urban social movements (in the US, The Right to the City Alliance, in Hamburg, Frankfurt and Berlin local organizations also use this label), (Mayer, 2013) to the UN-HABITAT’s policy documents (2002, 2010). As Kuymulu (2013) remarks, the UN agency’s construal of “the right to the city” implies bridging the urban divide, but blurs the contrast between Lefebvre’s vision of the city as collective work and the predominance of exchange value today.

Nowadays, the “right to the city” is the most burning issue in the urban social movements’ literature. Undoubtedly, it merits a large discussion in this paper, beginning with Lefebvre’s own “new revolutionary conception of citizenship” (Lefebvre, 1989, p. 16), passing to Harvey’s version (2008) which sees the “right to the city” as an empty signifier and a motto to gather all different urban-based social movements under the same umbrella. Dikeç’s (2009) contribution to the discussion is also important since he includes the spatial dimension of justice. Merrifield criticized the term thus: “It remains at a too high level of abstraction to be anything that is existentially meaningful in everyday life” (2011: 478, author’s emphasis). In accordance with this criticism, this piece tries to focus on the concrete side of this struggle with the help of the fieldwork and by using another concept created by Lefebvre (1968), one that was put on the agenda again by Merrifield in 2011: “the encounter.” It is clear in this case that the encounters experienced by the neighborhood’s residents during their struggle led to the reestablishment of the neighborhood’s identity, to new social relations in and outside of Dikmen Valley and to the politicization of its residents.

Regarding methodology, this investigation is qualitative research. Like other qualitative research, it attempts to penetrate communicative situations by investigating the concrete practices that organize the daily lives of groups (Alonso, 1998). My first experiences with this
movement date back to the years 2009 and 2010 when I collaborated with the movement by providing technical and institutional support as an employee of the Chamber of Architects in Ankara. I participated in a variety of encounters such as visits by foreign activists from similar movements, meetings with professional organizations, protests, regular weekly gatherings at the Right to Shelter Bureau, festivals organized in the neighborhood etc. These were good opportunities to observe the politicization of residents active in the struggle. Since this two year period, periodic fieldwork has enabled me to observe further changes. My most recent fieldwork took place over two months from December 2012 to January 2013 and all the quotations used in this article come from this fieldwork.

Mainly, semi-structured, focused interviews were used to collect testimonies and different perspectives regarding the issue of the investigation from key actors such as residents, social movement activists, experts who have supported these movements and others. According to Orti (1986), what this type of interview aspires to reveal is the social form, the cultural and class-based aspects of the interviewee’s personality and ideological conditioning. In addition, a focus group discussion was held with representatives of various professional organizations (city planners, architects, civil and environmental engineers) who had supported the struggle during the seven years of its history. Participant observation also enriches the testimonies about the encounters experienced in daily life and during the organization of the resistance. These interviews were analyzed by classifying the striking parts of the interviews thematically after several readings. These classified quotations were then interpreted in the light of theoretical framework and participant observation.

The Right to the City as an Umbrella Notion

“Between equal rights force decides”
Karl Marx, Capital, Volume I

In an article that Lefebvre published just before May’68, he spoke about the right to a new city. Its renown has recently been renewed. At that time of its writing, Lefebvre saw the reconstruction of the city and a new city life as inevitable since a double crisis was present: the crisis of the traditional city and the crisis of agrarian civilization. He meant a new city founded on new foundations and called it an œuvre or artwork. He was talking about the right to construct a new city, not the right to the existing city, and he was sure that the science of urbanism desperately needed social support and political power to realize this ambitious aim. Most crucially, though, it depends heavily on the action of the working class that is suffering from
segregation and has no voice in decision-making processes. As Dikeç expressed it (2009), here Lefebvre was thinking of a political struggle to construct a completely new city and the ability to participate in such a struggle, which he described as the right to difference.

These arguments make sense only if we understand how Lefebvre defines the notion of “urban.” For him the urban is the place of encounter (this aspect will be discussed in detail later). “Urban” also means the priority of use value. This sounds completely strange for today’s urban populations who are made to think of the urban space as a domain of exchange value. Speculation on the prices of urban land and housing has recently been the engine of the financialization of the economy. The last few generations all grew up within a culture that emphasizes home ownership and investing in real-estate. This kind of mental conceptions are primarily imposed on society by public policies in the past and recently by neoliberal policies. Some conspicuous examples from different periods would include the reincarnation of the American Dream in the US since the 1930s, Thatcher’s council house sale in the UK during the 1980s and the dictator Franco’s Minister of Housing José Luis Arrese’s 1957 exclamation: “We want a country of proprietors, not proletarians.” As Harvey (2012: 50) asserts, clearly “cultural values flourish remarkably when promoted and subsidized by state policies.”

It is fair to say that the notion of the “right to the city” owes its current popularity mainly to the insistence of David Harvey on this empty signifier as an umbrella notion for urban-based struggles. He first emphasized this concept in an article published by New Left Review (Sept-Oct 2008) titled “The Right to the City.” Since then he has written and talked a lot about this issue. His most recent contribution to this debate was his book, Rebel Cities, published in April 2012. In the preface of this book he puts the difficulty of this notion in terms of definition, stating that: “The definition of the right is itself an object of struggle, and that struggle has to proceed concomitantly with the struggle to materialize it” (2012: xv). Merrifield (2013) reminds us of the principle of implicit recognition by expressing that rights are founded on the mutual acknowledgement of adversaries, not just agreeing on what a right is, but also agreeing on who has it.

At this point, let us consider the reasons for the attractiveness of the notion of “right” to us, namely, we who have experienced the golden age of capitalism, who grew up with stories about it and who once had the chance of surviving on its scraps. Since the crisis of the 70s, the welfare state that offers all the basic necessities as rights to its citizens has been melting into thin air. The yearning for those years becomes concrete through rights struggle. The question here is whether those rights were won in a struggle against the capitalist class or were merely tools for a
certain phase of the capitalist mode of production to overcome the capital surplus disposal problem, or what Marx called a crisis of overproduction, and to promote consumption. We are also the generations that struggled for civil and human rights, and obviously these rights still appeal to us. However, in these cases also mutual acknowledgement has been the prerequisite.

As mentioned previously, Andy Merrifield also joined the discussion of the notion of “right to the city,” claiming that it remains too abstract and is therefore difficult to make sense of in everyday life (Merrifield, 2013). Moreover, he identifies the encounter—again a notion from Lefebvre—as a concrete, livable and affectively influential social mechanism that can explain the politicization processes of urban society.

One more criticism Merrifield (2013: preface) makes about the “right to the city” concerns its scale. For him it’s too vast, and it’s also too narrow. It is too vast since “the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level.” It is too narrow because the desires of protesting people go beyond the scale of the city, for example, when they yearn for democracy.

The notion of the “right to the city” also requires careful treatment because it raises the broader issue of citizenship. According to Lefebvre (1996), the right to the city is a new revolutionary concept of citizenship. Dikeç (2009: 76) clarifies this point by noting that urban citizenship does not refer to a legal status: “but to a form of identification with the city, to a political identity. The construction of this identity through political struggle is enabled by another right—the right to difference.” However, actual rights discourses use the notion of citizenship, not as a result of rights struggle, but as the origin from which the rights that they are reclaiming derive. Here again, there is an emphasis on welfare state which must grant to its citizens their rights.

Keeping all these criticisms in mind, it is worth exploring the details of another concept created by Lefebvre, namely, the “encounter,” which has also been discussed more recently by Merrifield (2011, 2013).

**Encounters as the Nature of any Struggle**

“Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”

_The German Ideology_, Marx & Engels (1968: 11)

As noted above, for Lefebvre the urban is the place of encounter. Given the complexity of urban society and urban daily life, the encounter is an inevitable and essential part of modern cities. However, during last thirty years of neoliberal politics, polarizations have been deepened,
and this has led to spatial segregation within the city that impedes the usual encounters and interactions.

To initiate this discussion of the “encounter” here is how Merrifield (2013: 33) defines the term: “The notion of encounter is a tale of how people come together as human beings, of why collectivities are formed and how solidarity takes hold and takes shape, and how intersectional politics shapes up urbanely.” Furthermore, people produce relative urban space by encountering one another (Merrifield, 2013). The reason encounters are so important in today’s gigantic urban agglomerations is the degradation of the social relations, itself precisely due to this extension (Lefebvre, 1996). City dwellers live without real encounters in an intimate proximity devoid of sociability (Merrifield, 2013). In such a situation, encounters mean more than ever. On the other hand, encounters are only a part of the politicization process, which also includes discourse (in this case, rights discourse), political background and goal-oriented political action.

What make these encounters possible and affective through time are common circumstances asserts Merrifield (2013), departing from Spinoza’s concept of common notions. These encounters are prolific gatherings where shared common circumstances lead to discussions, collaborations, and then (or from the very beginning) lead to the establishment of a common objective. They permit people to meet similar people and sometimes different people in a common circumstance. They help us to locate ourselves in this fragmented society. Moreover, they offer us the opportunity to feel a kind of belonging to a group or a struggle. These results and the time they require to occur depend on the encounter, and are really relative to the situation, the participants and their historical-social backgrounds.

Case Study: The Dikmen Valley Right to Shelter Movement

A Short History of the Movement

The Dikmen Valley movement emerged in Ankara in opposition to the terms and conditions of the urban regeneration projects that have been imposed upon the residents by the municipality since the 1990s. We must consider the historico-spatial development of Dikmen Valley neighborhood in order to grasp the emergence and development of the movement. Dikmen Valley is one of Ankara’s essential air ventilation corridors. Although some buildings such as summer houses appeared in Dikmen Valley as early as 1950, it was in the 1960s that squatter houses began to be built by those who were migrating to Ankara from rural areas.

In the 1970s, the number of squatter houses increased, and it became clear that most of
the residents belonged to the same ethnic group and had similar ideological and political orientations. More precisely, most of the residents were Alevis (members of a Shi'ite sect of Islam) and actively participating in leftist struggles. These groups built their houses with the help of the university students who belong to left wing political organizations. In the 1980s, the number of the squatter houses in the area increased greatly, leading to cultural and religious diversification in the neighborhood.

In the 1990s, the Ankara metropolitan municipality, then headed by a social democratic party, declared that an urban transformation project would be started in Dikmen Valley in order to restore the ecological balance in the valley which had been disrupted by the construction of a high number of buildings there. The project made steps both to ensure the participation of the local residents in the project and to protect their right to shelter.

As outlined in this initial project, recreational green areas in the valley would be formed together with new houses for both the residents of squatter houses and outsiders. To this end, two types of apartments were built: medium-quality ones for the residents and luxurious ones for outsider customers in order to finance the subsidized housing for the squatters (Aykan, 2011). The first phase of the project, which had been originally divided into three phases, was completed by the social-democratic municipality. As planned, green and recreational areas were created, and the residents’ rights to shelter were protected to a considerable extent. The process was mostly satisfactory for the owners of the squatter houses, and therefore, no resistance was met in this phase of the regeneration. Yet, most of the early squatters could not get accustomed to living in the apartments, or they simply could not afford the apartments. So they sold them and moved to peripheral neighborhoods where they could live in squatter houses or find apartments that cost less.

However, the picture began to change in the second half of the 1990s after an Islamist-conservative party took the place of the social-democratic one in the metropolitan municipality (Türker and Devecigil, 2005). Specifically, in February 2006, the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality redefined the nature of the project in its third, fourth and fifth phases. The number of buildings was increased, and the green areas, as well as the rights accorded to the residents of squatter houses were reduced. With these modifications, the Dikmen Valley project was transformed from an urban regeneration project into a real-estate development program. So the residents organized and mobilized under the leadership of those residents who had participated in radical leftist struggles. The resistance has expanded as these leading figures mobilized political networks such as unions, professional organizations and some other NGOs to support the
residents’ right to shelter. An important point to consider in the rapid mobilization of these organizations is that the Dikmen valley movement offered these opposition groups a platform to express their opposition to Ankara’s mayor, Melih Gökçek.

The involvement of the People’s Houses (Halkevleri), the Turkish Physicians’ Association (Türk Tabipler Birliği, TTB), and the Chamber of City Planners, the Chamber of Architects, the Chamber of Environmental Engineers, all three of which cooperate as the Turkish Union of Chambers of Engineers and Architects (Türkiye Mühendis ve Mimar Odalari Birliği, TMMOB) in the Dikmen Valley movement attracted the attention of the public at the national level. These groups increased both the cultural and the material resources of the movement, playing an important role in enabling the movement to advance its demands. These organizations informed the residents about their rights as well as about the legal processes for defending these rights. Moreover, they actively defended the rights of the people of the Dikmen Valley against the metropolitan municipality by organizing public protests and meetings, and by initiating litigation.

These organizations also played leading roles in the constitution and dissemination of a resistance discourse. The main theme articulated in the resistance discourse is that the struggle against the urban regeneration project is a struggle for one of the basic human rights: the right to shelter. Accordingly, the struggle has been called the “Dikmen Valley Right to Shelter Struggle” since 2007 (Yaman, 2011). These organizations also learnt from this struggle, first of all, they regained a hopeful prospect and learned how to see this problem as a concrete part of everyday life.

Concerning urban regeneration, the resistance discourse stresses that the project in question is a rent-creating and rent-redistribution project. In order to appeal to the general public, it also stresses that the struggle is not only against the injustices in Dikmen Valley, but also against all the injustices and unfair practices in the city. Thus the movement has led public protests against public transportation price hikes, against problems with the water supply and similar city-wide issues.

The People’s Houses became the most active organization during the mobilization phase of the movement. The People’s Houses are an organization founded by the state at a very early stage of the republic to promote enlightenment, culture and art centers mainly organized at the neighborhood scale. It has been shuttered and re-opened twice during its more than eighty years of history. They played a leading role in the opening of an office in the valley, called the “Right to Shelter Bureau.” The office has organized and carried out many activities in order to show the
general public and the related authorities that the valley belongs to the residents of squatter houses. For instance, the office holds weekly meetings every Saturday at 7 p.m. and regularly organizes festivals in the valley. They also encourage the “rights struggle” discourse, not only in Dikmen Valley, but also in other neighborhoods where they are active. This discourse has been highly appealing to the residents of squatter houses in Dikmen Valley, particularly Alevi and those who have leftist views.

Keeping in mind our discussion of the ‘rights to the city” debates; let us now consider the perceptions of the Dikmen Valley residents with the help of our empirical findings.

**Rights Discourse in the Movement**

It is widely known that the People’s Houses group is a recent protagonist of the ‘rights struggle’ idea in Turkey. They promote this mode of struggle in all the neighborhoods they have organized throughout the entire country. In 2007 they organized a conference called the “People’s Rights Forum.” The Forum’s manifesto describes the importance of the rights struggle: “Struggle for people’s rights is a conscious praxis of both a defensive resistance and a constitutive fabric. In the people’s rights struggle, resistance and construction goes one with one another” (from a book that collected materials from the People’s Rights Forum 2007).

They also use the media and internet efficiently to disseminate this discourse. On the one hand, they have their own news website that does not include their name. On the other hand, they try to establish relations with the local offices of the mainstream communications.

An attorney of the People’s Houses explained why the rights discourse was the only choice for mobilizing the residents: “In Turkey, in terms of linguistics, first of all having the right, to have it. Because people always have this perception. Be quiet, you have this much value, we can offer you this much. Because this is the best sentence to be formed against the discourse of the municipality, the discourse of the hegemony” (I3). Here he refers to the classist manner of thinking in Turkey: people are measured according to their wealth in general. This is a culturally internalized fact, and it is used as a justification by public institutions in this kind of situations. Then, as he puts it, reclaiming the right to shelter as equal citizens is the only way to confront this particularity.

Another activist of the People’s Houses claims that neoliberalism attacks the rights of the people. Therefore, reclaiming them is how we should fight against neoliberal politics. He clarifies: “We defined it ourselves as the main link in the new colonial revolutions. Because neoliberalism, imperialism is turning towards here, towards rights. Violation of the most basic
human rights. We determined that this place can be organized, and, as a result of this organization, it became clear that these struggles could be united. Because it is important for people to identify their own concrete problems first. In other words, it is crucial that people believe that they have the right (I1).

The key fact highlighted by the various activists that are working at urban regeneration sites is the potential of this kind of right to shelter movements, since “it is a direct interference with their living space” (I1). In addition, “The most important feature of the right to shelter struggle is the fact that the attack is very keenly felt by the people. It is not like education, when there is transformation in education it changes society in the long run, etc.” (I4).

This is an undeniable fact, not only because of the importance of a shelter in one’s life or the lack of economic means, but also due to the lack of alternatives in housing sector. As we have noted above, home ownership is imposed on societies by a variety of public policies. Moreover, rents are kept very high and credit is offered without consideration of credit worthiness in order to make the buying option more attractive.

The appeal of the rights discourse observed during participant observation and while conducting interviews stems from the despair of the residents of the neighborhood. They have been able to survive thanks to their squatter house for which they did not have to pay rent, since their incomes have never been sufficient to rent a flat or to pay a mortgage. Hence, thinking that they have the right to shelter provided one way or another alleviates their anxiety over the threat of losing their squatter homes.

During the struggle residents inform themselves, discuss issues and internalize the ideas that they have been living there for a long time, that they made this place a neighborhood and that, consequently, they have the right to a dwelling in the same neighborhood. This insistence appears in almost all the interviews conducted with the residents:

“I do not know how it is in Europe, but when you live somewhere for 5-10 years you have rights. Today the state provides electric, water, everything, roads, and tells you to live here. Thirty years later, this is a valuable area please leave. But where do we go? I think this is exile for its people within its own borders. Go wherever you want” (I6).

“Now I have a son, same age as I was back then. I have a 14-year old son. Think about it, we gave three generations to this place. My father, me and my son. So three generations lived here. How can I give this up so easily? I spent my childhood here, I gave birth here, I made them here. Would I not want to live in nice places? My child plays in the dirt. I would want to offer my
child nice places to live, but I do not have the means. Because my means are enough for this place. But they begrudge me even this. ‘You do not deserve this’ What do I deserve? You take my taxes. I serve this country, you take my taxes. Tomorrow my child will go to military service for this country, but you can come and tell me: ‘You are an occupier; you do not deserve this place’ They are the ones that do not deserve Turkey. Because we made this place. I think a place that I made is my right, not theirs” (18).

This quotation shows that they also mention citizenship as a guarantee of their right to shelter, and in many cases they define it as their “birth right.” It is also striking that when they want to emphasize their citizenship, they put “foreigners” as “others” on the other side of the equation. This is a clue regarding their resentment towards public administration. The first quotation below specifically emphasizes the case of the Bulgarian Turks who came to Turkey in 1984 to escape their government and were welcomed very warmly by the Turkish government with dwellings and jobs upon their arrival.

“This is my birth right. When people emigrate from other countries most of them are given houses, etc. I am a citizen of Turkey. If foreigners have that right, why do we not deserve it?” (17).

“We live in this country, we are citizens of this country, we pay taxes, we serve in the military, and our children go to school in this country. We are the children of this country; we did not come from somewhere else. We did not come from Afghanistan or Russia” (19).

Obviously, rights discourse is very strong due to its historical connotations. It really promises a lot, even if nobody knows exactly how to enforce these rights. In the case of the Dikmen Valley, the despair in which residents find themselves has no easy solution, but believing in their rights makes the situation bearable. Rights discourse is really appealing, and most of the time, it is a good starting point for a mobilization process. On the other hand, experience shows that the various kinds of encounters that occur during the struggle make people believe in themselves and in solidarity. Encounters enable them to know themselves first and then others, and to realize the common ground shared by diverse struggles.

**Encounters that Led to the Politicization of Dikmen Valley’s Residents**

In Dikmen Valley, a variety of opportunities for encounters have been effective in the specific sense that residents have been politically awakened during the seven years of the struggle. These have included encounters with police forces, with other residents, with local governments, with the state, with the justice system, with other struggles, with journalists,
urban professionals and with politicians. Again the volunteer attorney of the struggle put it very well: “They got to know everyone, all the institutions, all the uniforms, the flag, the law, the police station, the courthouse and the municipality. They all made sense of what these actually serve, what these actually mean in their little world, in a very healthy way. Of course, they had tons of confusion before they managed to make sense of it” (I3).

The most striking encounter mentioned by the all interviewees is their encounter with the police who came with demolition crews and heavy equipment during the night of February 1, 2007. A middle-aged woman with three children from Dikmen Valley described the fear of that night: “At four-thirty in the morning policemen were everywhere, five thousand policemen. Everywhere you look there is a policeman. We built our barricades at the lower parts, but there was a sudden attack, something unexpected. This was our first experience, but we had a very beautiful struggle. Women, girls, children, man, youngsters. But it was very cold. The weather was so cold, I swear, our hands were sticking to the rocks, our feet were sticking to the ground. We could not feel our feet, but we had to do it, we had to defend the neighborhood. This neighborhood handled five thousand policemen” (I7).

For the neighborhood that night served as a turning point. The residents generally agree that it allowed them to witness their own power in action and to believe in themselves. Particularly, it changed the minds of the residents who were still skeptical about the struggle, since they saw that when they came together they could overcome such a big threat. Other organizations also realized the power of the Dikmen Valley movement with this incident as the leader of the movement asserted: “February 1st was a turning point for us, if I may say so. They saw on February 1st that, in spite of all these attacks, these people fought for 9 hours, they did not permit the demolition of even one house, and the police left empty handed. Some of them were injured, and seventeen of us got arrested. After that, institutions (chambers, NGOs etc.) began to sympathize with us. They saw the power, that power will be created here” (I2).

Surprisingly, this encounter was also a shock for the police officers. They did not know how to react against elderly, children and women who are just like their family members. The elderly and the women of the neighborhood talked to the police officers, hugged them, cried and asked for help. These are not the typical reactions that police forces confront during the protests of unions or students. According to the volunteer attorney, this difference led to unprecedented events in the police force and some dramas for families: “Apparently many officers wrote to the department so that they do not participate in the demolitions, we heard many things. Even that there are people, like brother Muhlis whose nephew is in the riot police, so his nephew came to
Before this resistance, the residents of Dikmen Valley were strangers to each other, since the neighborhood was full of immigrants from different parts of the country. People of the same origin (sectarian or ethnic) were living close by each other, away from the others. For example, Alevis were living in one part of the valley, Kurdish Sunnis on the other side, and finally, Turkish Sunnis were living on another side of the valley. This segregation occurred due to discriminatory policies and practices that have a long history in Turkey. On the other hand, as every migration phenomenon shows they started to live together so that each community could provide infrastructure and be able to accommodate newcomers. This proximity also provides a kind of security for the community. The leader of the movement describes relationships in the neighborhood prior to this struggle: “Before this struggle began the situation here was such that residents would not greet each other” (I2).

These polarizations melted down in this struggle. The residents came together for a common vital goal. During regular encounters when they had to fight side by side, they regained their mutual trust and got the chance to know each other. They have experienced the importance of mutual solidarity and recognized the power they have when they are together. This process of resistance has created a new infrastructure of social organization during more than seven years of struggle.

A young Kurdish Alevi resident, one of the most active ones in the struggle, stressed this aspect of the struggle: “We do not have much contact with the lower neighborhoods because they see you as an Alevi there. Where we live we are all relatives, people from neighbouring villages, from the same area, and they are like that, too. It was after we set up the Right to Shelter Bureau, now I have many close friends among them, as we got to know each other we realized that we are actually similar, how meaningless it was to marginalize each other” (I6).

One of the leading activists of the People’s Houses said: “For example, in Dikmen Valley, when they heard that the Cem Evi (place of worship) of the Alevi people is going to be set on fire, Sunni people also came to keep watch. So this divide was eliminated in the neighborhood. The struggle for the right to shelter actually organized these things. So the struggle united the loose ends that hegemony uses to divide society” (I1).

What is happening in Europe and in other parts of the world with migration has always been present in Middle East nations composed of diverse ethnicities and sectarian differences. This is definitely the case in Turkey. It is really difficult to change people’s perceptions of
“others” in their own country and city. These discriminations have strong historical backgrounds in the collective memory. It is critically significant that the experience of an urban social movement managed to sweep away (to a certain extent, of course) all these barriers in the same neighborhood.

The success of this struggle is strongly related to the social organization infrastructure they have built since 2006. They are collaborating with political groups, with organizations from other neighborhoods, with professional organizations and with university students. They are also active in current national politics, participating in different protests and supporting other struggles. It is generally recognized that the success of Dikmen Valley’s struggle comes from the ability to create such an infrastructure. These encounters with other political actors, first of all, made them feel that they, too, are political actors in the public sphere.

“The common ground is support, I say, supporting each other. For example, now among the TEKEL workers, some come from my village Amasya Gümüşhacı. I went there. They are all people we know. When they saw me there they felt on top of the world. Seeing me from Dikmen Valley was even more special. Dikmen Valley is in every region, every province, everywhere right now. For example if I visit you, you will be happy to see us. For example, recently our students were attacked at METU (Ankara's Middle East Technical University). We went to visit them as Dikmen Valley. It is like we are different from everyone else. The kids were very happy to see us because they support us a lot. They stand on our side. No matter who, we will be standing with them because we had their support. We have reached a point, but we have done so with a lot of support” (I7).

Considering the profile of the women of the neighborhood, some of the most striking encounters have been the ones experienced by women. They are mostly housewives, with little education, and some of them wear head scarves. They rarely leave the neighborhood in their daily lives. This struggle has been very important for them from the beginning, since they are the ones who are always at home in the neighborhood. They are the ones who benefit from their gardens along with their neighbors. This was a serious attack on their living and socializing environment. This became an advantage for the struggle. Women organized other women, and they watched over the neighborhood during the day.

“But the important thing is, for example, the women play a big role in the urban regeneration struggle. I mean both because it is their habitat, and because they do not leave the valley very often. I mean their daily life is in the valley, so they are more possessive. They are on
The strongest aspect of the struggle is the fact that they are in the front, the women” (I4).

A female resident explains the contribution of the struggle to her own progress: “Of course, when I joined the struggle I came to a different point of awareness, came together with different people, and it contributed more. It contributed these things more and more. It took me three steps, five steps forward” (I10). She mentions the variety of encounters that she experienced in the form of visits supporting the struggle; “We hosted so many strangers in our home, ate with them, had tea with them. Nice dialogue, nice conversation. They say you must come to visit us, too, and so on. Very nice feelings, we lived through different things” (I10).

The shift observed in the relations between women and men within the neighborhood are also considerable. According to the leader of the movement; “For example, there is no separation between men and women here. Before, women would not shake hand with me because of religion, but today we can sit together, eat together, drink tea together and chat together. Most of the participants in our Saturday meetings are female” (I2).

One of the most important effects of these encounters is the one experienced by the children of Dikmen Valley. The People’s Houses paid special attention to the children, and their two activists deal especially with children’s problems. They explained the positive and negative effects of the process on children’s evolution:

“Children are going through a trauma. They all grew up in the struggle. They are all children of the resistance. Children that were seven when it began are now fourteen and fifteen year-olds. The newborns are now seven or eight years old children. They all went through this trauma. They talk about it, and I witnessed it too. When they hear something at night they say: ‘Mom, is it demolition? When will they demolish our house?’ or they go to school thinking like this: ‘We may not be able to find our house when we come back.’ This is making them stronger. It is traumatizing them but also hardening them” (I5).

Finally, the youth who grew up within this struggle expresses themselves very well. They support the struggle, especially as messengers. They are responsible for bringing information to the residents. They visit every house in the neighborhood, and when necessary, they organize meetings with multiple families in order to tell them about recent changes and the decisions of the Saturday meetings. This means continuous encounters with residents, discussions of the ultimate situation of the neighborhood and certainly an important responsibility. A nineteen year-old woman who was only twelve years old when the struggle began explains its effect on her
own growth.

“IT helped us understand it, because we learned everything through the shelter struggle. First of all, one learns about himself/herself, learns about what he/she is really doing. So my life really changed in many ways. I learnt self-criticism, I learnt to protect everybody’s rights, first of all, protecting my own rights, then protecting other people’s rights. In the end, people approach us with no self-interest” (I12).

These encounters can be multiplied by the thousands. The examples above show that each encounter enables us to realize another way of perceiving things, provides an re-envisioning, not only of “others,” but especially of oneself. These encounters hold up a kind of a mirror for the people who experience them. Encounters facilitate the politicization of the participants along with the discourse. If discourse can be used like eyeglasses to correct perception, encounters are the eyes that use them to see.

What has the Dikmen Valley Movement achieved? Families struggling against displacement have managed to remain in their homes in their neighborhood along with their neighbors, and successfully escaped the high costs of rent and transportation they would have faced had they pushed to the periphery. The Dikmen Valley movement is an inspiration for other neighborhoods that are threatened with displacement. Neighborhoods such as Mehmet Akif Ersoy in Ankara, and Armutlu in İstanbul have enlisted Dikmen Valley’s residents to help mobilize their residents. They have shared their experience with these neighborhoods, not only during visits, but also during forums that have been organized to exchange experience and knowledge. Finally, the mayor of Ankara was calling Dikmen Valley’s residents ‘invaders,’ but he was forced to sit down and negotiate with them at the beginning of 2012. Although this occasion did not resolve the issues, during Dikmen Valley’s seven years of resistance, Ankara’s municipality has repeatedly been forced to cancel its project and re-plan it under a different name in order to avoid legal liabilities.

**Concluding Remarks**

This article is the first evaluation of a recently completed qualitative investigation. Concentrating mainly on three influential thinkers’ contributions (Lefebvre, Harvey and Merrifield) to recent discussions of politicization, it aims to draw attention to important aspects of urban social movements. With a concrete case at the neighborhood scale, an inquiry on the politicization processes of the participants is more viable. It is understandable that nowadays much attention is paid to mass movements such as the Gezi Uprisings, Occupy Movement, 15M and the Arab
Spring. These are obvious proofs of people’s general unrest and their distrust in the system. It is also clear that communications technologies and on-line mobilizations are very significant in today’s social movements. However, if we are concerned with real awakenings and then substantial changes, we must focus on people’s concrete daily life experiences since it is these experiences that make them feel like more than just a face in a crowd and transform them into tangible political actors.

On the other hand, rights discourse is really forceful, particularly “the right to the city” discourse. It is very important, especially at the beginning of a struggle, because of its persuasiveness and for rhetorical purposes. However, this should not blind us to the fact that, although this discourse influences people, it does not transform their mentality.

Mental conceptions can only be reconfigured by experience, and in this case we call them “encounters.” After all, the politicization of the masses, who are excluded from decision-making mechanisms and seen only as votes to be manipulated, can only realize their power by experiencing it in their own surroundings. This is exactly why urban social movements organized around a variety of concrete problems have the important potential to convert these mobilizations in a more comprehensive struggle, in short, to unite all of them. This can only be possible if each participant in these local movements manages to see the whole picture and can thus interpret the political dimensions of whatever may be happening. The importance of the actual movements is in any case undeniable. These movements express a restlessness that is shared by people all over the world, and they are as global as the financial system itself.
References


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