

The Reasons of Immorality of Land Development in Turkey

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Abstract

This study investigates the reasons behind the current immoral practices in land development in Turkey. In this vein, this article's aim is to provide a comprehensive framework for the issues revolving around land ethics. In this regard, three main reasons are put forward to comprehend the reasons behind immoral practices in land development. The first of these reasons is that the conception of civilization has deteriorated due to the Turkey's Westernization process. The second main reason is that legal and administrative regulations are both incompatible with Turkish society and lag behind social reality. The third main reason is the desire to realize a model of development based on rent. After having evaluated the current situation in Turkey, the conclusion suggests, in order to solve this problem, that a (re)conception of what a city is and what its functions is required, especially a conception which is both sufficient in terms of civilization and one in which public welfare is prioritized.

Key Words

Islamic Civilization, Land Ethic, Public Administration and Planning, Rent, Western Civilization.

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This study investigates the main reasons behind immoral practices in land development in Turkey. The issue of land development, when considered within the context of public management and ethics, attracts attention as it is one of the most problematic areas, similar to customs and taxes. Furthermore, since the issue of land development is related to the city environment, as well as the buildings in which individuals live, it has a direct effect on citizens' lives. Turkey's specific case is interesting since, after having undergone, and continuing to undergo, a process of rapid urbanization since 1950, Turkey has experienced a very powerful process of land development and reconstruction since the early 2000's. Therefore, the issue of land development morality has become much more pertinent as compared to the past.

Harvey's approach (2013) will be instructive in the attempt to comprehend the theoretical foundation behind the issue of land development morality. Harvey attributes the problem to neo-liberal capitalism, claiming that the right to property and the rate of profit violate any kind of right. Land development corruption within the private sector, whose goal is simply to accumulate capital through rent, is not an unfamiliar practice in Turkey. Thus, Keleş (2006, p. 609), Tekeli (2011, pp. 290-291), Kahraman (2010, p. 62), and Kılınc, Özgür, and Genç (2009, p. 41) have also drawn attention to this point. Western authors, too, have discussed various issues revolving around land development morality. For instance, Pløger (2004) argues that it is an illusion to consider planners as unbiased, adding that planners have at least political preferences and encounter ethical issues, values, and approaches when planning. A more concrete example is purported by Barrett (2008) when he states that planners attach great importance to the codes of ethics related to planning in the USA.

In this study, it is claimed that there are three main reasons for land development corruption in Turkey; the first reason being the decomposition of the conception of civilization, the second being that legal and technical regulations are not compatible with the society and lag behind social reality, and the final being the assumption that economic development can be achieved through creating an economic system based on rent. In order to better comprehend these three reasons, it is necessary to examine the history of urbanization in Turkey.

The Decomposition of the Concept of Civilization

During the early republican period in particular, the conception of civilization underwent a shift away from its axis; that is, a move away from Islamic civilization and a move toward Western civilization in the name of secularization. However, this axis shift has still not been successfully realized. The success of Western modernity lies in its ability to substitute religious values with secular values as needed. To give a concrete example, the word “order” is the most frequently used word by any visitor to a Western city in his/her description of that city since the idea of “cosmos,” a natural and universal concept, has been reinterpreted within a mechanical and technical framework (Mumford, 2007, 2010). In fact, this concept of order, which is contrary to both nature in general and human’s created nature in particular, has been successfully applied because of the strict adherence to the values of the system.

In the 19th century, the Edict of Reorganization (Tanzimat Fermanı) and the elements of Western civilization under the influence of this edict began to be imported to the Ottoman State. Since this period, the rules of land development and urbanism have been used within the borders of this geography both during the Ottoman State and the current Republic of Turkey (Orhonlu, 1984). However, the structures, needs, and characteristics of the Ottoman cities to that date (pre-Tanzimât) were quite different from those of Western cities since Western cities at that time attached great importance to the issues of speed and security (Bumin, 1990, pp. 98-100). However, the classical Ottoman city was an environment of peace and tranquility. Indeed, Le Corbusier, during his trip to Istanbul, drew attention to the environment of peace and tranquility (Le Corbusier, 2012).

Despite the West’s handicap in terms of culture and civilization, Ottoman bureaucratic intellectuals, as well as Republican elites, adopting a formalist approach, were willing to import the physical elements of Western cities into Istanbul, being the seat of the Caliphate, and therefore of the Islamic world. Given that these physical elements were adopted slowly one by one, they only composed individual pieces of a greater “order,” but are also meaningful when considered as a whole. On the other hand, the Ottoman State was not successful

in this particle approach (Ortaylı, 2000). Moreover, this kind of understanding sped to the early republican period in various forms (Bozdoğan, 2008).

The modernization of the cities in the early Republican period realized itself more often in the buildings and public spaces (boulevards, parks, squares, etc.). Boulevards hold an important place in Prost's plans, who designed İstanbul. These boulevards were extended during the period when Menderes was in power in the 1950's. Parks, an important aspect of modern cities, were given an important place in the planning of the cities of İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir; as such, Gezi Park (Travel Park), Gençlik Parkı (Youth Park), and Kültür Park (Culture Park) were built in these cities, each acting as a symbol of the Western concept of modernity. Similar to the aforementioned parks, squares, as in the examples of Taksim Square and Kızılay Square, became a vehicle for the Republic to produce societal order and were presented as a secular substitute to the tradition public spaces, such as mosques and their accompanying facilities (schools, hospitals, etc) for cities (Akpınar, 2010; Uludağ, 2010; Zander, 2010). To some, the early Republican period, during which different architectural schools follow each other, was the "golden period" of Republican architecture (Aslanoğlu, 2010, p. 25). The most important characteristic of this period was to adapt the new, imposing national (Westernized Turkish) identity to cities in a uniform manner (Ergut, 2010, p. 19; Erkmen, 2010, pp. 44-45; Gurallar, 2010, pp. 58-60; Gür, 2010, p. 69).

As a result, due to the urbanization policies of the state, serious progress was made in terms of breaking with Islamic values. However, the desired degree of success, that is the complete erasing of Islamic values, was not achieved in the often violent imposition of Western values in their place since industrialization, which formed the underlying structure of urbanization, was not adequately implemented (Keleş, 2006).

The Incompatibility of Legal and Administrative Regulations with Turkish Society and their Lagging behind the Social Reality in Turkey

As one of the results of the experience of modernization in Turkey, the legal regulations and administrative structure related to land development were

realized through directly copying and imposing the regulations and structures of Western civilization onto a Muslim civilization. Until recently, despite the long history of the modernization adventure, these regulations and structures could not be implemented into a stable and consistent system. The Republican state, whose purpose was to copy and import the model into Turkey as it was in the West, experienced issues and reactions stemming from the very system it wished to impose as it had not been successful in establishing the system. Therefore, the rules expected to serve as solutions to the issues facing cities and institutions themselves became problems after a very short time. As a result, the state began to give priority to solving the problems facing administrative bodies that it had itself created, rather than dealing with issues facing the people it claimed to be responsible for (Ortaylı, 2000; Tekeli, 1993, 2009; Yerasimos, 1999).

As such, municipalities were given authorization to deal with the problems of the cities during the Republican period. However, municipalities usually fought with financial and jurisdiction issues and were, on one hand, unable to perform the tasks assigned to them satisfactorily, and on the other hand, reluctant to adopt and, in the case of adoption, implement the land development plans that they had drafted. While municipalities were busy solving their own institutional problems, cities were largely abandoned to their own fate (Tekeli, 1991, 1996, 2009).

When both the municipalities and central government failed to solve the problems of the cities, the people were obliged to produce their own solutions. This solution manifested itself in the phenomenon of slums. In a situation in which neither the state provided any assistance nor the private sector provided housing for those with adequate levels of income, the public had no other choice but to build shacks or slums. The bankruptcy of the urbanization policy at the state level meant the loss of importance and legitimacy of the land development law, which led to lawlessness, rather than the law, acting as a rule.

The Assumption that Economic Development will be Realized through Rent

The rent and urban corruption based on this income has been the reality of Turkey since the last period of the Ottoman State, the Tanzimat period (Karpat,

2010, pp. 200-201). In the early Republican period, great importance was given to the implementation of urban plans; however, even in this era, corruption was acknowledged due to rent. For instance, in this period, Falih Rifki Atay states, “I do not feel sorry for anything as much as I did for the Jansen plan and planning discipline in general when they failed in the hands of speculators and pleasure seekers” (Atay, 2004, p. 487). In the period between 1950-1980, the understanding of radical modernization of the previous period was abandoned (Tekeli, 2001, pp. 27-28), which led urban planning to lose its status as one of the most important parts of the Republican’s secular ideal, which had been held as in a holy position during the beginning of the Republic. In fact, the phenomenon of apartment blocks, which emerged during the last period of the Ottoman Empire (Öncel, 2010), but which were institutionalized and strengthened especially in 1965 with the adoption of the Condominium Ownership Act, has been one of the most important results of the search for rent. In the period of 1950-1980, in which the construction of apartment blocks was on the rise, both municipalities and central administration institutions prepared land development plans for rent (Belediye İstanbul, 1978, p. 13). When public authorities did not claim these urban plans on behalf of public interest, special interest groups determined the development of the planned and unplanned areas of the cities for the sake of accruing rent.

After 1980, the unplanned slum areas faced great pressure to be transformed into rentable property. This pressure resulted in the law numbered 2981, the most important law for land development relief after 1980. The most important result of this law was the transition from slum housing to apartment blocks (Sönmez, 2003; Şenyapılı, 1996). However, the apartment blocks that were built in place of slums were both of low quality and weak, considering that the architectural and engineering aspects were “apartment-slums” (Dündar, 2003, p. 67). The transition from slums to apartment blocks, starting from the 1980’s and continuing until 2000, favored small or medium-scale rent apartments for areas previously dominated by slums by contractors (property developers) searching for ways to obtain rent. Since the 2000’s however, large capital groups have been seeking to invest in urban areas, in-line with the prevailing neo-liberal policies that had been in action since the 2000’s (Göksu & Bal, 2010).

Conclusion

As indicated above, it would be incorrect to attribute the immoralities and corruption experienced in land development in Turkey only to the immoral behavior or the bad characters of certain people (such as managers, contractors, or even citizens) since the issues faced are no longer a simple matter of ethics or personal deviations. Indeed, the land development corruptions have been institutionalized, generalized, and ossified. The reasons behind this corruption lie in a number of structural reasons experienced since the beginning of the Ottoman State's endeavors in 'modern' (Western-style) planning which have increasingly been leading to a situation resembling cancer and gangrene.

As stated in the study, the very first reason for the land development corruption in Turkey is the decomposition and erosion in the conception of civilization in the Turkish psyche. While the city envisioned in Islamic civilization has been consciously abandoned since the beginning of the Republic, it is not possible to claim that the current conception of urban planning which is no more than an imitation of that of Western civilization has been successful. The second issue is related to current administrative and legal issues. At this point, the state needs to provide proactive solutions to these persistent issues, rather than merely palliative and reactive ones. Finally, the charm of urban rent poses a great threat in terms of land ethics. In recent years, this threat has been manifesting itself in a stronger way due to the rise of the real estate sector. As a result, two conditions necessary for the establishment of the ethical dimension of modern urban planning, one which forms the basis of modern (Western) civilization, namely the existence of civilization awareness and the use of legal solutions to address urban problems, were not realized as expected in Turkey. Therefore, while the necessary conditions were not sufficiently realized in order to encourage society to act morally in this issue, a very important reason not to act morally emerged, which manifests itself in this case as rent. Unless conditions are improved so as to allow society to act morally, rent will continue to function as an excuse for immoral actions in terms of land development.

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