An urban social movement challenging urban regeneration: The case of Sulukule, Istanbul

Ülke Evrim Uysal *

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Research, Snellmanninkatu 10, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Urban regeneration projects have become a focus of attention in Istanbul due to tourism promotion, particularly great expectations from the European Capital of Culture 2010 Event. Sulukule, a Romani neighborhood on the historical peninsula of Istanbul, was designated as an urban redevelopment zone. The Sulukule Urban Regeneration Project is one of the recent efforts to present "a better urban environment" to foreign visitors and investors. The project has accelerated the struggle for land, causing dispossessions, evictions and demolitions. Locals' needs and rights are denied. Consequently, the citizens in Sulukule started to oppose regeneration and formed an urban social movement. This paper attempts to analyze the urban social movement in Sulukule, the Sulukule Platform, which emerged as an urban coalition challenging tourism-led regeneration.

Introduction

The Sulukule Urban Regeneration Project is one of the recent regeneration projects in Istanbul, which has caused tensions between the authorities and activists. In Sulukule, a mixed group of activists have organized themselves as the Sulukule Platform (SP), challenging state-led urban regeneration for tourism promotion. The activists monitor Roma identity in Sulukule, which is one of the oldest Roma settlements in Europe. Urban regeneration in Sulukule is related to the 'cultural turn' in urban studies. As the government and the municipalities define a legitimate 'urban culture', while the 'Romani subculture' in Sulukule is viewed as threatening the cultural sustainability of the city. Moreover, urban resistance in Sulukule claims the right against accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2008) and urges evictions to stop. Thus, the Sulukule case calls for a broad, multidisciplinary analysis. With awareness of this socio-economical and cultural complexity, I introduce and describe the Sulukule Urban Regeneration Project and analyze SP as an urban social movement.

In this paper, I ask the following research questions: How did the activists gain capacity to resist urban regeneration? How did the activists present their demands? In which ways did SP contribute to the struggle against urban regeneration? To what extent have the activists influenced the urban process in Sulukule?

The research covers two periods: May–September 2009 (during large scale demolitions) and May–July 2010 (after demolitions). During these periods, I occasionally visited Sulukule. Therefore, my personal observations were the first motivation for beginning this study. Eight interviews were conducted in total and categorized into three groups for analysis. The first group of interviews was conducted with activists and professionals. The focus was on how SP opposed regeneration. Second, I interviewed with locals in Sulukule who encouraged the documentation of individual stories. I focused on how ambiguous property rights caused problems and how displacement affected the Roma. Third, I conducted interviews with the residents of the adjacent neighborhood, Çarşamba. I was able to document the prejudice against the Roma in Turkey, which later played a role in SP's fate. Further primary data sources consisted of newspapers, petitions, court documents, statistics, domestic and international reports, surveys conducted by the Fatih Municipality and SP, and websites and portals of SP and the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and the Fatih Municipality. In analyzing data, I focused on the causal relationship between the events. I tried to find out how the locals struggled with dispossessions, eviction and displacement and how SP consequently reacted and organized locals against urban regeneration.

I will begin by discussing urban social movements (USMs). Then, I will introduce Sulukule and the Sulukule Urban Regeneration Project, following which I will analyze the demands presented by SP. Finally I will critically evaluate the achievements and effects of SP, its role in the struggle against urban regeneration in Istanbul and future prospects.

* Tel.: +358 417482546; fax: +358 (0)9 191 24564.
E-mail address: ulke.uysal@helsinki.fi

Urban social movements

The term 'urban social movements' was introduced by Manuel Castells. Castells, using Louis Althusser's structuralism, categorized organized social unrest, uprisings, pressure groups and oppositional fronts as USMs, which claim political power and participation. Castells expected that USMs and working class organizations together produce a radical change in political power, an urban revolution (Castells, 1977, 1978b, 1983; Pickvance, 2003a, 2003b, p. 103). Despite his break with the Marxist epistemology, Castells continued to study USMs in the 1980s and introduced cultural perspectives into his theory. His emphasis changed from national revolutionary urban movements to the protection of territorial and local identities (Nichols, 2008, pp. 842–843), and his focus shifted from class issues to actors (Milicevic, 2001, p. 767).

Castells (1983, p. 322) defined USMs using the following four elements.

1. Accomplish the transformation of urban meaning in the full extent of its political and cultural implications, an USM must articulate in its praxis in the three goals of collective consumption demands, community culture and political self-management.
2. It must be conscious of its role as an urban social movement.
3. It must be connected to society through a series of organizational operators, three in particular: the media, the professionals and the political parties.
4. A *sine qua non* condition: while USMs must be connected to the political system to at least partially achieve its goals, they must be organizationally and ideologically autonomous of any political party.

Castells' research on USMs inspired many scholars and has been re-read and re-formulated several times (Pickvance, 1986, 2003a, Hanniga, 1985; Staeheli, 2006; Mayer, 2006; Miller, 2006; Ward & McCann, 2006; Nichols, 2008).

Since Castells's research in the 1970s, there have been radical changes in USMs. According to Pickvance (1995), several aspects, such as regime transitions and the relationship between the parties, USMs and the state's roles, have reshaped USMs. For Mayer (2000), new competitive forms of urban development, the erosion of traditional welfare rights and the shift from government to governance has influenced the change in USMs. Mayer (2009, pp. 364–365) describes four phases of USMs. In the first phase, 1960–1980, USMs emerged due to the crisis of Fordism. As Castells (1977) stated, having sharp national and regional differences, USMs struggled for fundamental changes in politics and society. The second phase of USMs, 1980–1990, was a reaction towards the neoliberal paradigm that eroded Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions. USMs organized increasingly varied and fragmented protests to address unemployment, poverty and housing matters. However, as Kavoulakos (2006) notes, USMs were not radical anymore; they gradually became less political on collective consumption issues. According to Mayer, the third phase, 1990–2000, began when the neoliberal market mechanism transformed cities into assets wherever possible. De facto erosion of social rights triggered the emergence of USMs against gentrification and urban regeneration in several cities. Finally, Mayer argues that the fourth phase has begun due to the integration of financial markets and the increase in flexibility of international capital. Cities, as global competitors, have adapted entrepreneurial strategies to attract more investment. Such strategies often ignore or sacrifice districts where economically vulnerable dwellers live, which eventually causes urban protests and converts into activists those citizens who rally against the lack of sustainability and destructiveness of neoliberal

forms of urbanization (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2009). Nevertheless, USMs today are also different than the ones in previous phases. According to Mayer (2009, pp. 365–366), USMs are becoming more organized and globally linked. They have discovered the connection between the 'local' and the 'global', and they now attack global neoliberalism in the form of global corporations. Activists, by efficiently using communication technologies, organize anti-globalization rallies (Leontidou, 2006a).

USMs often oppose institutional logic, leading to confrontations with the state (Castells, 1978a). However, state-civil society relations have changed since the 1970s. Politics at the local level has gained importance, while politics at the national level has been in decline (see Jessop, 2000). The role of USMs in the provision of social services has been recognized and has caused the institutionalization of USMs. However, institutionalized USMs have lost their radical nature and have become compatible with the Post-Fordist mode of regulation (Kavoulakos, 2006). USMs have become important vehicles for transmitting radically diverse grievances and views of the civil society to the state (Nichols, 2008, p. 78). They may have direct influence on the state at the local level as 'critical urban planning' agents (Souza, 2006). On the other hand, USMs are not always in cooperation with the state. Instead, they often stand against corporate capital and the entrepreneurially minded state apparatus (Harvey, 2008). Thus, at the local level, the state stigmatizes USMs, follows divide-and rule strategies, blocks the connections between activists and uses physical force to disintegrate USMs (Nichols, 2008).

USMs emerge after a particular *stake* (urban crisis, urban regeneration, housing or development projects and displacement). USMs appear on a *social base*, which eventually causes *mobilization* and *action*, turns into *a social force* and then creates *action* (Castells, 1977, 1978a, 1983; Pickvance, 1986). USMs have specific and clearly defined *demands*, which are represented through various means of *action* such as demonstrations, marches and writing petitions to local and global authorities; cultural events such as movie festivals, song contests and exhibitions; and academic events such as conferences and declarations. Demands determine the rise and fall of the USMs. USMs may continue to exist if the other demands are sufficiently encouraging enough to keep them active. According to Castells (1983), political support is a key element to analyze the success and the failure of USMs.

Nichols (2008, 2009) discusses how USMs are formed. He develops three concepts to analyze the formation and activities of USMs: networks, contact points and strong/weak ties. Networks play a vital role in coordinating activities; they allow activists to establish connections among themselves and with distant allies. Networks make the flow of information and financial and political support possible. Developing networks depends on contact points (meetings, protest events, forums, public places, political institutions and demonstrations) where diverse activists gather and exchange ideas (Nichols, 2009, pp. 83–85). Nicholls also discusses strong and weak ties. Strong ties between the activists enhance collective capacities and increase motivation for action, whereas weak ties generate opportunities to access new resources and information (Nichols, 2008, pp. 844–845, 856).

In addition, a USM requires a specific location, such as a neighborhood, district or a whole city, to function (Castells, 1977). USMs are specific to national and cultural contexts (Castells, 1983, p. 123, 324). There is a growing number of case studies on USMs, such as individual case studies (Body-Gendrot, 2000; Castells, 1978b, 1983; Lelieveldt, 2004; Kavoulakos, 2006; Olives, 1976), comparative studies (Clarke & Mayer, 1986; Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler & Mayer, 2000) and regional research introducing Latin (Castells, 1977, 1983) or Latin American (Souza, 2006), Anglo-American (Castells, 1977, 1978a, 1983; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1985; Mayer,