

COMMENTARY

Hope, Belonging, and Catharsis: Critical Urban Pedagogies in Istanbul

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Abstract

Co-written by bachelor students and their lecturer, this commentary is a critical reflection on the Materiality and Urban Politics (SOC387) course taught at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul in the summer of 2022. The course unfolded during a time of political unrest at Boğaziçi following the appointment of a new president, which brought the campus under a state of police siege. In this context, SOC387 explored relations between the material and the urban/political through democratic and inclusive pedagogical approaches. Bringing together reflections on the sociopolitical context in which the course took place, classroom pedagogies, and students' commentaries, we reflect on how the course helped participants redefine their sense of belonging to, and engagement with, Istanbul's urban/political environment during a time of perceived disempowerment and "crisis of democracy" in Turkey. By exploring the productive tensions between urban space, politics, and democratic pedagogy, this commentary argues that teaching and learning in and about the city can be cathartic in reinforcing participants' will to act on and contribute to urban politics.

Keywords: urban anthropology; critical pedagogies; urban belonging and participation; Istanbul

Introduction

Materiality and Urban Politics (SOC387) was designed as an intensive summer course for undergraduate students at Boğaziçi University, which is situated on the European side of the Bosphorus Strait in Istanbul, Turkey. The course aimed to broaden the study of urban politics beyond a focus on political institutions, discourse, and resistance, to also highlight the role of materials, such as urban infrastructure, technologies, and consumer goods, in shaping citizenship and political life. Theoretically, the course provided a background on new materialisms in the social sciences to explore how urban infrastructure and materiality play a role in statecraft projects, practices of citizenship, and temporal and affective politics. The course entailed 42 hours of class, with a lecture, film discussion, and seminar every

week. Unlike the more passive lecture, the film discussion and seminar were both very interactive and aimed to strengthen students' participation in class through debates and class discussions. In terms of assessment, students were evaluated on their participation, group oral presentations, and a research paper. For the latter, students chose their own topics, formulated research questions, and engaged with the course's reading material.

As a public institution, Boğaziçi University enrolls students from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, and SOC387 was no exception. Most students were in their early twenties. Some had been born and raised in Istanbul, while others were new to the city and had only recently come from different areas of Turkey. As a summer course, SOC387 drew students from across departments and at different stages of their undergraduate education, contributing to the diversity among participants. Most students were majoring in the humanities or social sciences, e.g., in political science, philosophy, history, sociology, and management, but some also came from engineering. Despite this diversity, SOC387 students seemed to share a common political position vis-à-vis recent happenings at Boğaziçi, as will be explained further below. This, we believe, enhanced a sense of solidarity among the group as everyone shared similar opinions about the university and the city.

The in-person seminar and class discussions were particularly important for students, who had finally returned to campus after years of remote learning during the pandemic. They were also crucial to Dr. Sansone's teaching practice, which is firmly grounded in the idea that knowledge is best conveyed in a classroom that is shaped into a "community of learners" (hooks 1994): a non-hierarchical space where learning is facilitated by students and teachers alike. In this space a lecturer does not impart information *ex cathedra* but acts as a facilitator of dialogue, setting a tone of respect, curiosity, and care towards others' ideas and learning dispositions. Dr. Sansone had been trained in these teaching methods, which are now mainstream, in the United Kingdom, but SOC387 students were unused to them. While some courses at Boğaziçi have a seminar component, students in the course stated that throughout their educational paths in Turkey, hierarchical modes of teaching had prevailed: most often, teachers would expect to be treated as authorities imparting lectures without engaging with students in group discussions. For this reason, the non-hierarchical, collective discussions held in SOC387 felt like a new learning experience for students. Over time, this way of teaching, and students' responsiveness to it, helped construct the SOC387 classroom as a space of democratic inclusiveness (Freire 1973; 2004), active participation, and critical interrogation of urban politics.

At the end of the course, some of the most participative students in the class expressed a desire to further engage with urban issues as a collective. Most of these students had spent a significant amount of time in large urban centers (Istanbul and Ankara) and had been politically involved in the protests at Boğaziçi. The "Teaching the City" call for papers prompted a move in this direction and we, the co-authors, met to discuss how the course had altered our perception(s) of the city. The following piece puts together extracts from our discussions. While each of us had original contributions to make, we ultimately decided

to write as a collective voice, using the third person when referring to students' individual accounts.

What follows is a group reflection on how the classroom, the university, and the city are deeply intertwined dimensions. We start by describing the political context in which the course unfolded, its impact on our lives, and our reasons for joining the course. We then discuss how, in turn, the classroom experience had an affective resonance for us: it strengthened our hopes for a better urban future, it gave us the feeling of belonging to a collective body that was critically engaged with the city, and it offered moments of catharsis by redeeming us from past frustrations.

The Course in Context: Students' Frustration with the Boğaziçi Protests

SOC387 unfolded at a time of deep political upheaval and resentment at Boğaziçi University. The appointment of Professor Melih Bulu as university president on January 1, 2021, sparked harsh criticism from academics and students alike and led to several protests in and around the campus. As an academic from outside Boğaziçi who was aligned with Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, Bulu's election went against the principles of the University Senate, whereby only the university community can elect a president. In a joint statement published on January 3, 2021, Boğaziçi students and academics denounced the president's appointment as an anti-democratic practice introduced for the first time since military rule in the 1980s.

After Bulu's appointment, the humor magazine *LeMan* featured the event on its cover. The title was "The Conquest of Boğaziçi" – one of Turkey's most progressive and prestigious universities had been conquered. In reality, the conquest of Boğaziçi stretched back to the transformations of higher education that had occurred during the 21 years of AKP rule. In line with the ruling party's neoliberal and populist agenda, market-based values and policies had shaped higher education (e.g., Inal and Akkaymak 2012). Departments whose efficiency and performance could not be measured quantitatively, such as the sociology department, had been falling out of favor. This approach had been vigorously enforced at Boğaziçi University and had eroded its foundations, hindering academic freedom and intellectual curiosity.

Protests followed Bulu's appointment and subsequent, equally controversial, appointments by the government. Between January 2021 and mid-2022, the Boğaziçi protests took various forms: marches, rallies, sit-ins, art exhibitions, and even an alternative graduation ceremony. As the movement acquired force and gained international attention, it was subjected to brutal police crackdowns and disciplinary action. Hundreds of students were detained and many arrested, professors were dismissed, and police surveillance became omnipresent on campus. The protests did not manage to turn the tide, leaving many protestors demoralized. By the time SOC387 started in June 2022, students felt tired and discouraged by the difficulty of organizing collective action and agreeing to a shared political line. Throughout the struggle, there had been many defeats. Unsurprisingly,

though, some students had developed an interest in urban politics, which led them to enroll in the SOC387 course.

The University in the City

Alongside the sense of defeat and hopelessness wrought by the events at Boğaziçi, many students joining the course were also deeply frustrated by the brutal urban development that had afflicted Istanbul for the past 20 years. Turgut, a co-author and a philosophy major, clearly expressed this discontent, pointing out how the university was also deeply enmeshed in the politics of the city:

Before familiarizing myself with theories and methods of urban anthropology via the course, I was already greatly aware, affected, and frustrated by the previous and currently unfolding spatial and material issues in Istanbul, such as the privatization and destruction of public spaces and coastlines, unlicensed and uninspected construction stemming from widespread corruption, car-centrism in inner city transportation (Tekeli 2010), the social and environmental effects of the government's "megaprojects," the ever-increasing presence of security forces and surveillance appliances in public spaces, and the social struggles born from neoliberal urban policies (Ahunbay, Dinçer, and Şahin 2016). Even though I was well-informed about the past and present social, political, and economic factors that led to these drastic changes in Istanbul, I still felt lost and demoralized. It was evident that the case of Boğaziçi University – with the neighborhood's streets and local square being sealed off with police barriers, the constant presence of riot police in the vicinity, and advanced surveillance systems being installed on campus – was a mere spatial manifestation of Turkey's grander scheme of political turmoil. Yet, I did not know how to deal with such frustrations and what actions could be taken.

Many students in the class shared Turgut's feeling of demoralization vis-à-vis the city. But there were also glimmers of hope. For example, some students looked positively at the Istanbul municipal elections in 2019, when the opposition party candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu brought 15 years of AKP government in Istanbul to an end. For Elif, a co-author and SOC387 student, the event shifted her sense of participation in the city:

Before the elections, the authorities made most urban decisions regardless of how local inhabitants would feel about them. With the change of hands, the Istanbul Municipality started showing increasing consideration for Istanbulites' needs and opinions. For example, the introduction of the Istanbul Municipality's official transportation app, Mobiett, has eased local inhabitants' use of public transportation in the city by indicating the times and whereabouts of buses and trains. Similarly, the "Digital Art in Public Space" project was for the youth to use digital art to enhance their city experience and urban daily life. The Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), located in an area traditionally reserved for the Istanbul

Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and twelve district mayors, has become de-privatized for public use, with libraries and dedicated study spaces. Also, the participatory local government initiative “Beyoğlu Is Yours” aimed to gather public opinions on the neighborhood through forums and collective discussions, deliberately asking for local inhabitants’ suggestions on how to better the area. IMM’s participatory governance approach motivated me to help disadvantaged local communities raise their voices and communicate their issues by benefiting from these initiatives.

Such affective and personal experiences of urban civic life strongly shaped students’ motivations for enrolling in the SOC387 course. Turgut, who did not know how to deal with his frustrations, or what political actions to take in an increasingly neoliberal city, enrolled to better understand urban issues and learn how to exercise his agency in the city. On the other hand, Elif enrolled to gain tools that would help her participate in local urban policymaking. After Imamoğlu’s victory in the 2019 election, she was enthusiastic about studying participatory approaches to urban governance as means of tackling urban problems. Some students, it seems, joined the course to overcome the frustration they had previously experienced in the city and channel it towards more hopeful or generative outcomes.

Urban Belonging

Alongside hope, the SOC387 classroom offered some students moments of belonging. Öykü, a co-author and major in political science and international relations who had completed the third year of her bachelor’s degree, said that before taking SOC387, she had not given much thought to what urban belonging means. The SOC387 classroom was a context in which she could articulate her feelings of urban estrangement by engaging in group discussions:

I always felt a certain disconnect from my urban surroundings, which persisted from my teenage years into adulthood. I always struggled to make space for myself in Istanbul, my birthplace. To belong somewhere is to feel accepted and safe within its perimeters, free from harm and dangers. With the events of the last few years, this sense of belonging has been lost to me even within the campus, now under the watchful eyes of the riot police looming right outside its gates, undercover police officers, and an advanced surveillance system. I could only articulate this once my peers expressed similar feelings and thoughts during SOC387 class discussions. I then understood that my experience was not unique or solitary.

Meanwhile, the course readings on the “neoliberal city” and the final assessment enabled her to contextualize and reflect on her experience of urban estrangement in a very concrete way:

As the course progressed, its content enabled me to draw parallels between my experiences and many examples around the globe. The freedom to choose my

topic for the final research paper allowed me to investigate the subject I was most interested in – the neoliberal policy reflections on urban infrastructures – which led me to study the “shopping mall.” Present to me since childhood, the recently renovated and renamed Maltepe Park shopping mall served as my marker when my mother drove the family down the major D-100 highway. The 15-kilometer trip felt tedious and lengthy to me as a 5-year-old, and the only way I could understand our arrival while peeking out of the window in the backseat was to identify the greatest building complex in the neighborhood, the Maltepe Park shopping mall. The view from the backseat feels different to the 5-year-old of today, who can see not one but five shopping malls within the immediate area, gated communities guarding themselves against the city, and a plethora of skyscrapers stretching out into the clouds, all messily cluttered together and devoid of meaning. The neoliberal urban restructuring that took place within these last few decades in Istanbul was the main topic of my research paper, which I examined through the prism of the “consumer city” and its role in shaping our identities and relations in society.

Öykü stated that when she linked the changes she had observed to neoliberal policies, she found a new way of looking at the city. She could finally identify urban change as a result of deliberate policies and see alternatives that might recover lost public spaces. In effect, the course shifted her self-perception as an urban citizen, leading her to feel less estranged from and more engaged with the city.

Catharsis

In the process of preparing this commentary, some of us used the term “cathartic” to describe the sense of motivation and purification felt during the course. By the time the course started, the protest movement had already reached a point of exhaustion, after more than a year of struggle that had failed to bear fruit. For Altan, a co-author majoring in political science and one of the many politically active students, the protests were beginning to evoke feelings of disconnectedness and bitterness towards many of his fellow students who were also engaged with the protests. As the course progressed, he was able to relieve some of his bitterness and learn to better connect his political struggles to the material spaces he studied and in which he resided. For him, that moment of “making sense of things” was cathartic and a crucial revitalizing factor that pushed him back into action.

Similar sentiments echoed around the group. Like Altan, Turgut found that catharsis had much to do with overcoming frustration. After witnessing the militarization of the campus and having participated in the protests, SOC387 provided him with tools to examine those events from a broader and more informed perspective. Throughout the course, Turgut became able to rationalize, analyze, and think of urban conflicts critically, which he found empowering. This newly achieved awareness allowed him to overcome his frustrations, something he described as a cathartic experience.

Catharsis was also referred to as the experience of belonging to a collective body. Ali, a co-author and SOC387 student, drew comparisons between the course and the space of protest at Boğaziçi and, earlier, at Gezi Park in 2013. At the age of 14, Ali had spent time in the Gezi protest camp set up in Istanbul's iconic Taksim Square as part of a three-month wave of demonstrations against the development plan for Gezi Park and the AKP's repressive politics. At the protest camp Ali had felt, for the first time in his life, how powerful a feeling it was to be part of a community fighting together. In contrast to Turkey's highly polarized identity politics, in Gezi people's diversities were unified for a common cause, which brought about great collective power. To Ali, this collective space of protest was purifying because it brought about new life:

...you raise your head, look around, and start noticing things you haven't seen or heard before. Then you feel that you are living, a true catharsis. ... Not only a pleasurable experience but also a purifying one.

At Gezi Park, Ali realized that people's desire to pursue a common goal arises in a common space we all belong to and share. In the SOC387 classroom, he found the same affective dimension he had experienced in the Gezi Park protests and the Boğaziçi resistance. He felt he belonged to a collective that engaged critically with urban/political issues.

Overall, the course, both in terms of its content and its group element, had the cathartic effect of redeeming students from past frustrations, isolations, and delusions, while simultaneously reinvigorating their political engagement and personal aspirations in the city.

Conclusion

Both in terms of content and pedagogy, SOC387 attended to the needs and interests of students witnessing and experiencing a particular political moment in Istanbul. Students' active participation in the course testifies to the importance of designing course syllabi and teaching methods that are attuned to the context in which learning takes place and to students' experiences.

Against an alienating urban and political environment, the SOC387 classroom was purposely and collectively shaped as a space of hope, community, and possibility. The classroom did not need elaborate teaching tools to develop into a "community of learners" engaged with the city: simple exercises aimed at enhancing participation, cohesion, and dialogue in the classroom (e.g., debates, group discussions) sufficed to empower students to break – to experience catharsis, even – from their sense of constriction and powerlessness in the urban, educational, and political context of Istanbul and Boğaziçi University. The intellectual and affective group dimensions carved out by the students and the lecturer reflected our desires for collective political participation after years of pandemic and urban/political repression in Turkey. In a sense, the classroom became a living

projection of our desire for urban civic participation; it became a space where we finally felt free to engage with topics that were politically beyond our reach. It was a dimension of inclusiveness and democratic participation that we would have liked to see reflected more widely in the urban context that surrounded us – a coming together that enabled us to imagine and experience how belonging to the city actually feels.

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