

## Under Siege: Neo-Liberalism and the Militarisation of Public Space

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### *The Problem*

‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!’ (Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, 1959: 41)

Georg Simmel, perhaps still *the* theorist of urban experience, argues in *The Stranger* (1971) that society is not an external object that precedes the constellation of interactions between human beings. Society, according to Simmel, does not exist before ‘sociality’ takes place through it. If relations of sociality are taken away society simply disappears. As such, Simmel sees a generalised conflict in society, a contradiction between ‘life’ and ‘form’, between life as mere value and relatively stable forms that life takes. The formal structure of sociality, Simmel argues, is a continuum between two limits; human life is a permanent struggle between life and form (1971: 375). Premised upon sociality, the whole history of society and culture ‘is the working out of [the] contradiction’ between life and form (ibid. 375). For Simmel, in other words, sociality and togetherness are fundamental ingredients of society and life where the subject’s identity is constituted through conflict and antagonism.

This is most obvious when Simmel develops the concept of the stranger. In contrast to ‘the wanderer’, who, as defined by Simmel, is the one ‘who comes today and goes tomorrow’, the stranger is the one ‘who comes today and stays tomorrow’ (ibid. 185). Simmel’s stranger is thus a significant element of society itself, an element ‘whose membership within the group involves both being outside and confronting it’ (ibid. 185). The stranger comes from a different origin and ‘interacts’ with society; its distant relationship to society ‘indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near’ (ibid. 185). Embodying personal remoteness and spatial nearness at the same time, the

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stranger, therefore, looks like an example of what Simmel calls ‘sociability’. Precisely in this sense, the proportion of remoteness and togetherness is a fundamental experience of society. In line with ancient philosophy, society allows you to experience remoteness and togetherness as the proper bases of the social as well as the political.

This experience of togetherness and nearness is increasingly threatened within the horizon of neoliberalism today as it bypasses society as a space of political encounter and radical conflict. Neoliberalism seeks to expand market-based economic rationalities into all spheres of life (Davies, 2014: 244; see also Brown 2015); it is the current rationality of replacing politics with economics. By seeking to render the political a technical rationality, a calculated and strategic behavior, neoliberalism seeks to suppress not only the ability to debate and critique but also ‘real events’. It produces a vision of society in which conflict and antagonism are replaced with economic evaluation and measurement. Neoliberalism is, in short, hostile to politicisation and radical social change (see Taşkale 2016 a: 2).

Society is a necessary condition where the social and the political are constituted through radical conflict and antagonism. The logic of neoliberalism, on the other hand, tends to create a society without conflict and antagonism, a preemptive logic in which difference cannot ever be transformed into solidarity and ‘unknown unknowns’ cannot turn into radical structural change. Simmel asserts conflict and social change as the bases for sociality. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is built on the assumption that there will be no radical dissent, critique and fundamental conflict. To put it even more directly: neoliberalism signals a disengaged politics in which any questioning of reality, or radical structural change seems to be ignored.

If we want to witness this logic of depoliticisation, of disengagement in its pure form, we have only to follow the path of the paintings produced by Edward Hopper, one of the best-known American realist painters. *Automat* (1927), for instance, depicts a well-dressed woman, sitting alone in a restaurant, gazing at her coffee cup. Having removed one glove only, maybe on her way to or from work or has just come in from outside waiting for a friend, the woman seems to have a deep sense of loneliness, abandonment and disengagement, the weight of which cannot be carried by the figure inside the paintings alone. Reminiscent of a disillusioned landscape, the restaurant, too, seems largely empty and unhappy. The big window makes a powerful setting for the painting: just as there is no street lighting, so there is no information at all about the world outside. Inside

however, a bright light shines out, cutting through the darkness of world outside.



*Figure 1 Automat – Edward Hopper (1927) (<http://automathopper.blogspot.com.tr/>)*

Hopper's paintings portray deadly silence, loneliness and despair of city dwellers. But the fact that Hopper's paintings depict loneliness (and despair) as a fundamental experience of city life is a bit tricky. The more you look at it, the more its fame seems contrary:

[Hopper] says that looking at the painting gives him a sense of not being alone which is often the opposite of what people say when they see this picture. Many have seen in this disconnected state some conflict or bitter post-coital argument, but he sees it as a painting of two people who

are alone, but comfortable in being alone. There is comfort in knowing that everyone is as alone as you are (Kennedy, 2004).

No doubt Hopper's was a society that essentially takes into account internal factors. Hopper was a deeply private man lost in the worlds of art and reading (see Slater 2002: 141). It is his profound alienation from contemporary life that led Hopper to return to internal factors and thus makes his art 'suspicious of modernity itself' (Levin, 1995: 229). Such signs of suspicion and alienation are in fact very much related to Hopper's puritan views. Hopper believed that modernity was 'antithetical' to him as he 'disapproved of social and structural change, of overcrowding, of disorder' (Slater, 2002: 141). For Hopper, in other words, the modern city was a place of violence, disorder and despair, which should be avoided altogether. It was this 'threatening' city that made Hopper paint isolated individuals, detached from the city both socially, politically and spatially (Hobbs, 1987; see also Slater, 2002). Thus, what must appear on the outside is what happens inside the character, at the intersection of action and reaction. This complete emptiness, the coincidence of engagement and disengagement, allows you to become yourself by intensifying the viewer's focus upon the character. 'Anyone who looks at a Hopper becomes involved' (Proulx, 2004: 16). But the image that can be seen as one person's unhappiness can also be seen our inability or disengagement to help. It is as if the scene and the viewpoint are constructed, 'so that the viewer is transfixed in front of a frozen moment from a narrative which seems to stretch far beyond the picture plane' (Kennedy, 2004). That is to say, it comes from somewhere else in the shadow, or loneliness does not only emanate from the picture itself but also from the viewer's reaction:

It is as if the picture's frame has to be redoubled with another window frame. The frame is always-already redoubled: the frame within 'reality' is always linked to another frame enframing 'reality' itself. Once introduced, the gap between reality and appearance is thus immediately complicated, reflected-into-itself: once we get a glimpse, through the Frame, of the Other Dimension, *reality itself turns into appearance*. In other words, things do not simply appear, they *appear to appear*. (Žižek, 2006: 29)

What Hopper accomplishes here is a disturbing sense of loneliness and dislocation. He depicts a city where people are imprisoned in a suspended architecture, in which sociality is an impossible idea. Indeed, drawn out into an endless waiting, Hopper's characters are trapped in their shared ignorance, disconnectedness, which carry space as far as the void. In this sense Hopper paints the desert, the desert of the void. The woman in *Au-*

*tomat*, for instance, says nothing, she has no dialogue, no touching; she is the monument of defragmentation and disconnectedness in a fragmented and interconnected world. Thus, in *Automat* reaction and action, politicisation and depoliticisation, the scene and the off-scene, inside and outside tend to disappear in a 'zone of indistinction'. And perhaps herein the difference between Simmel and Hopper is at its clearest.

Simmel's social theory is determined by external factors; his subjects are cultivated through the agency of external forms. The poetics and politics underpinning Hopper's 'representational' painting (Slater, 2002) on the other hand, are concerned with internal factors that evoke senses of loneliness, boredom and despair, that is, the alienated material consequences of 'unwelcomed modernity'. In this way Hopper 'reveals a poverty of a society' and shows how 'the machinery of industrialism is no longer operative, and the illusion of progress as a motivating life force is no longer believable' (Hobbs, 1987: 18). Simmel's subjects are metropolitan subjects, lost into the European bourgeois interior and increased financialisation. Hopper's subjects, in contrast, are everyday suburbans, middle-class Americans frozen in fordist economy and meaninglessness of the everyday. For Simmel, the city is as much about openings as it is about foreclosures. Thus the European city also has a positive effect on human actors as it enables them to undergo permanent changes. For Hopper, by contrast, the American city has a negative impact on the mind or the self, and is placed in cultural opposition to European cities. Hopper painted during the inter-war years of 'prohibition and depression' where unemployment, poverty, protests and strikes were part of a normality in American society. He thus witnessed what happened to the American city (New York) 'when its growth was explosive, when its economy collapsed, when some of its people were left behind and struggled to make sense of the transforming world in which they lived' (Slater, 2002: 142).

Moreover, Simmel's social theory is a response to the rapidly changing, early twentieth century European city. It emerges as a response to the rise of the rationalized, scientific worldview and the emergence of the instrumental money economy. Hopper's 'representational' practice, on the other hand, is a response to the rapidly changing, early twentieth American city, focusing on the subtle interaction of human subjects and the environment in which they live. Simmel's social theory is concerned with money economy, the increasing commodification of life, in which the differences between values tend to disappear. Hopper's representational practice, however, is interested in urban architecture and cityscapes where solitude,

boredom, and resignation reign. This is because Hopper viewed modernity and rapid urbanisation with suspicion and usually depicted them with 'trepidation and uneasiness' (Slater, 2002: 141; see also Levin, 1995). Simmel has a sense of revolutionary optimism, whereas Hopper is conservative in politics that accepts things as it *is* and thus allows no room for sociality and social structural change.

In short, Simmel views society as the very arena where sociality takes place, where the personal freedom required for bold creation can be found. Because life is the most important value, difference and sociality that take 'freedom' as their main point of departure are the heightening of life as 'mere-life'. Hopper, however, depicts a world of empty time and space in which radical social change is impossible. *'Time, like space, is...suspended—nothing is approaching the city other than the viewer'* (Slater, 2002: 148). In Simmel's society the 'revolutionary' struggle in the process of 'mere-life' is 'the fundamental motive force of [radical structural] change' (see Simmel, 1980: 34). In Hopper's society, by contrast, lonely, unsure and altogether bored people live together without doing anything: they are not capable of acting to free themselves from a life which they don't want to live. The relation suddenly disappears, without the characters changing, but leaving them in the void. For Simmel, *relation* is the fundamental ingredient of city life, whereas for Hopper *non-relation* constitutes the position of the subject. For Simmel, the ruthless struggle is a break with the given, while for Hopper the given reality is the only reality that interiorises and thus pushes struggle to the background. Simmel symbolises action, Hopper reaction. Simmel's social theory offers spaces for alternative social and political imaginaries, while Hopper's anti-urbanism does not allow the social imagination to flourish. If Simmel symbolises liberation, Hopper depression. Simmel's city is capable of conceiving lines of flight, whereas Hopper's city is characterised by an incapacity to conceive of conflict and struggle. Simmel's society is full of optimism, liberating rather than depressing, while Hopper's is pessimistic which should be feared and avoided. If Simmel's social theory symbolises conflict and radical structural change, Hopper's representational painting symbolises a disengaged world in which conflict and radical political change are ignored.

In this essay I argue that ours is a society that increasingly resembles Hopper's paintings, a society that cannot imagine radical political change. Ours is a neoliberal society in which lives are captivated in a disinterested boredom, inhabiting a time all of their own, unrelated and unbothered by

disruptive ‘revolutionary’ events. As such, this society does not give us, ‘*all of us*, the space and time to become something else, the right and opportunity to experiment, to enable lines of flight, to forge solidarities’ (Amin et al, 2000: 26). Neoliberalism – the institutionalised reaction, the systematic silence – is the clear logic beneath this process.

The ideal of a world without conflict, antagonism and radical political change is the problem of neoliberalism today. Neoliberalism, therefore, is the impossibility of a real change regarding the ‘given’ situations; its main task is to displace dissent, rupture, and resistance against the system. Its logic, of course, is political. It is a determinate formation, a principled reaction with tendencies towards the increasing neoliberalisation and militarisation of society. While neoliberalism sacralises free-market policies, it also mobilises all sorts of military/security complexes, a process in which the state of exception has become the rule (Agamben, 1998; 2005). Indeed, the militarisation belies the seemingly pacific façade of ‘consensual’ neoliberalism; contemporary society now seems to be formed in the image of militarisation. In this sense ‘the military urbanism’ becomes the organising principle of contemporary neoliberal society (Graham, 2010). In a sense, therefore, the exception has become the norm: military urbanism has permeated ‘the sphere of the everyday, the private realm of the house’ (Misselwitz & Weizman, 2003: 272).

The militarisation of society is central to depoliticised, managerial neoliberalism that has characterised the past few years. Especially since 9/11, this process has been accelerated. However, this is not to say that the militarisation of society did commence on September, 12, 2001. Processes of urban militarisation and securitisation are nothing new; they predate ‘the war on terror’. Thus, one could argue that the ‘war on terror has been used as a prism being used to conflate and further legitimize dynamics that already were militarizing urban space’ (Warren, 2002: 614). In effect, there is a particular relationship between the histories of the city and political violence. For instance, war, for Virilio (2002), is at the origins of the foundation of cities. War, according to Virilio, is not only to be understood as ‘warfare’ but as a means for thinking about the way in which society itself is constituted. War, in this sense, is an ‘absolute immanence’ that political sovereign power ‘ceaselessly fails to capture in performing the kinds of biopolitical manoeuvres upon which forms of civil pacificity are built’ (Reid, 2005: 5). As an absolute immanence, ‘pure war’ enables the state to establish homogeneous cities under the auspices of purity and safety. Indeed, methods of discipline and control—coupled with processes

of urban militarisation—served to normalise war and preparations for war as central elements of the material, political-economic and cultural constitution of cities and urban life (see Graham, 2012: 137).

To understand the importance of militarisation and war as the organising principles of society, it might be useful to read Clausewitz from a Foucauldian perspective. Such a Foucauldian perspective suggests that in *On War* (1993), Clausewitz did not simply define the conjunctive relation of war to society and politics as the art of strategy. He provided a theory of strategy upon which complex power relations operate within contemporary societies (Foucault, 2003; see also Reid, 2003). The primary significance of Clausewitz's strategic thought, according to Foucault, was its basic principle upon which a new form of political power had emerged, that which Foucault described as 'governmentality' (Foucault 2007, 2008; see also Reid, 2003: 2). Clausewitz's theory is valuable as it outlines the modern role of warfare in what Foucault (1998) called 'the strategy of power'. As Foucault provides an analytics of power that permeates the morphological networks of contemporary society, so Clausewitz helps us better understand the networking of 'the liberal way of war' (Dillon & Reid 2009). In this sense, militarisation and war take on positive characteristics of neoliberalism that takes on the task of the management of life in the name of the entire population and life.

Today neoliberalism increasingly centres on securitising and militarising the architectures and circulations of the city (Dillon & Reid, 2009; Graham, 2012). The struggle for contemporary society now coincides more and more with the struggle for the liberal way of war, for the ability to provide security is especially useful in maintaining a liberal way of life. However, as Agamben (2001) shows, security consists not in the prevention of crises and catastrophes but rather in their continual production, regulation, and management. Therefore, by making security central to modern governance, there is the danger of producing a situation of clandestine complicity between terrorism and state terrorism, locked in a deathly embrace of mutual incitement. When security becomes the organising principle of politics, and society and law is replaced by the state of exception, a state 'can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic' (Agamben, 2001).

The state of exception is always reactionary. Its declaration is a form of violence. We know very well from Schmitt (1985) that the political involves a permanent struggle between order and 'chaos'. This is why the state of exception is declared to save the condition of normality (order),



that is to say, to avoid a true exception (Žižek, 2002: 108). What's more, the state of exception is always counterrevolutionary because its main task is to displace dissent and resistance against the existing order. It holds together as a response to an 'urgent threat': how to protect order against the fear of 'disorder'. In this sense, the state of exception is not any power whatever of neoliberalism but its central aspect. Neoliberalism, in short, has transformed the logic of exception into a form of sociality. The state of exception is no longer a historical anomaly but the normalcy itself.

#### *The Militarisation of Public Space in Turkey*

Is not contemporary Turkey under the AKP rule (the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) a good example of how the militarisation of society and the state of exception operate together? Indeed, contemporary Turkey has become a place where public space and the state of exception are central to the government's power grab. Furthermore, it also shows how intervening and militarising public space plays a key role in government's vision of 'neoliberal Islam' (Atasoy, 2009; Balkan et al. 2015; Coşar and Özdemir, 2012; Tuğal 2016). The end result is a country where violence, religion and surveillance have come to colonise cityscapes and public spaces of everyday life to protect the power of the capitalist class, creating an Islamic bourgeoisie superior to the economically disadvantaged classes and groups (see Öncü, 2014; Taşkale, 2016 b).

The military urbanism is pervasive and global, but its local and regional variants should be examined in detail. Turkey is such an example. Since the military coup in 1980, Turkey has witnessed massive privatisation of land and public spaces. Mainstream parties have seen urban space as a significant means of capital accumulation. Especially after 2002, this process has been accelerated (see Ünsal and Kuyucu, 2010). Within the AKP rule, free-market dynamics were extended to the peripheries, accompanied by a massive commodification of urban space. At the heart of the AKP's policy was the rapid and usually brutal process of the displacement of the urban poor and what David Harvey (2005) calls 'accumulation by dispossession'. This process of accumulation by dispossession, embodied by the neoliberalisation of all public assets that are seen as outside the market (e.g. the university, the healthcare system, and so on) was not complete without the demolition of public spaces and parks, as well as the destruction of nature and heritage. In this new regime, therefore, the productive labour-

power has expanded to cover all spheres of society and life -in short- all aspects of Turkey itself that have become commodified outside of the old-fashioned labour process under Islamic neoliberalism (Karaman, 2013, Tuğal, 2013). As a result, Turkey has become a country where everything can be bought and sold from every angle in the market.

In contemporary Turkey, street life is reduced to consumerism in which nothing really meaningful happens, a country made safe for the Islamic bourgeoisie and their allies. Peaceful protests of any kind are banned, as the state of exception has become the rule. Collective action is restrained and fear becomes an open field for intervention and arbitrary exercises of neoliberal and Islamist power operating on a continuum with militarisation of society. Fear and danger meet the necessities of securitisation and militarisation, whereas civil and political rights are suspended in the name of the market's future stability. The association between fear and growing state security apparatus -in the interests of the market and the Islamic bourgeoisie- becomes almost automatic. What remains is a fearful subject whose ability to understand and make sense of events is suspended. Consequently, fear becomes a permanent feature, which circulates through the capillaries of everyday life.

In this context, contemporary Turkey is a place where neoliberal Islamism is in symbiosis with the militarisation of society. In other words, the enclosure and the massive privatisation of public spaces goes hand in hand with militarisation to stifle dissent as evidenced in the Gezi revolt in 2013.

Together with the commercialisation and commodification of inner-city gentrification projects (Lowering and Türkmen, 2011), the militarisation of urban space led to the disappearance of public space as we know it. Moreover, fear becomes part of the military Islamic-surveillance complex through which the neoliberal security state sustains and extends its activities. In this sense, the Islamic neoliberalism of Turkey is not about the state leaving the society and economy alone. Instead, state control has become a driving force in reproducing and appropriating public space. Thus the peculiarity of the Turkish case is the current hegemony of 'political Islam', which consolidates state power to create a regime characterised by the neoliberalisation and militarisation of public space and nature.

*Instead of Conclusion*

I've started this essay with a comparison between Simmel and Hopper. I've argued that Simmel's social theory opens up the space for agonistic relations and political events, while Hopper's is a city in which nothing happens, no perspective takes place. For Simmel, therefore, urban space is the very arena where everyday activities coincide with real events, where urban political subjectification takes place. For Hopper, on the other hand, public space no longer exists; it has disappeared. Hopper's is a city where individuals cease to appear as active agents, devoid political significance or critical practice. In other words, in Hopper's city there is no room for politicisation and radical social change.

In this sense ours is a society that has become a Hopperland, a society in which urban militarisation and violent economisation appeared to become unquestionable, naturalised backgrounds. We live in a neoliberal society which empties out the authentic cores that constitute politics, namely conflict and antagonism. Neoliberalism is, therefore, the current colonisation of politics by market-based techniques of evaluation and ever-increasing militarisation.

Contemporary Turkey, too, increasingly resembles a Hopperland, a country in which processes of ever-spreading marketisation and militarisation become productive and generative aspects of social life. However, Turkey is also a country where the Gezi revolt took place. The Gezi revolt demonstrated that public spaces are common grounds; they haunt the imaginations of people who can build a consciousness towards urban politicisation and emancipatory transformation. Though Islamic neoliberalism tries to occlude the very possibility of alternate social imaginaries, imagination nevertheless remains a significant element of politics. Imagination precedes neoliberal Islam.

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