

On the Verge of *Civic Breakdown*: Community and Territorial Division—the Town of Sincan

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Not quite expected by the community of Sincan, on February 04, 1997, the shanty streets of this modest town were shattered by the mechanical sounds of roaring tanks and APCs. Lined up in one of the main streets, a tank battalion with its logistics and in full combat position was manifesting its undefeatable authority through the gaze of reluctantly stagnant local people as if their rivals were to vanquish their “civil resistance”. Located in the periphery of the capital, and not so remote from downtown Ankara, around 20 kilometers, the town of Sincan and its engagement with the military soon caused a national crisis that politically devastated the whole country. According to the spokesperson of the Turkish Chief of the General Staff, “it was a routine military exertion. Yet, on its way to countryside, the convoy was forced to halt in downtown as it was suffered engine malfunctions”. For the political observers, on the other hand, the official statement was a complete fabrication because “the convoy was not a part of pre-scheduled military exercise; and furthermore, the Anatolian Agency, the state-owned news service, had already been informed about its exact route prior to this massive mobilization”.¹

Of many speculative affirmations, however, the belief that this was a skillfully executed “military moratorium”, became immediately a common assertion.² As some annalists suggest, the warning came not only for Sincan’s local administration, but also targeted the Islamisist-fundamentalist outgrowth and its nationwide expansion. Even, for some, the coalition government in which the Islamisist Virtue Party took part was at stake. Nevertheless, the town of Sincan, in this intricate struggle, was of importance: Originally planned to provide housing, retails, and small-scale social amenities for the growing proletariat, Sincan now is one of the larger settlement areas for the working class families as well as for communities with diverse economical, cultural, and educational classes. In fact, albeit its unpretentious scale and quality, the controversial history of this idiosyncratic settlement was more than its impecunious architecture for it has become a backbone for Ankara’s fundamentalist population who desires a spatial enclave through which their political sentience can experience autonomy and privilege. Among other social peculiarities the town of Sincan, for its inhabitants, is almost a sanctuary where they can practice their religious routines in all means.

What was strangely experienced in this community, in this sense, was in fact a political maneuver between “revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries” and the town of Sincan was the spatial representation of this enduring struggle. Notwithstanding, on the 21st of February the Second Chief of General Staff, Çevik Bir, in Washington D.C, powerfully articulated this confrontation. In his speech to American intelligentsia for the annual meeting of *Turkish American Council*, he declared that *they* in fact “balanced the democracy in Turkey”.

The streets of Sincan were now no longer “neutral spaces”, in Virilio’s own wordings, and the impetuous arrival of tanks and APCs was to restore the law and order on *space*.³ According to him, there seems to be an intricate relation between urban space and its occupation through

militaristic interventions, and the street is the most vital evidence of which the politics impairs itself for resistance, struggle, and conquer. Evidently, the surveillance of streets and thus the material presence of authority through the “shields of armored vehicles” represent the state’s political power that is in fact organized by one ideological grand-narrative to control and discipline another. More than simulation the very existence of army was in fact “undeniably real” and standing as a “legal force” that was to support and sustain the *territory* of the dominant. Along with this militaristically uncanny process to legitimize the state’s narrative, the people of Sincan, however, had been producing their own narrative that was to violate the governing party’s spatial and social perimeters. Transgression of space and thus social order could retrieve its perpetual meaning on the very material properties of Sincan, particularly in its streets and squares. In fact, what triggered the military were such spatial exercises deliberately designed and built by the fundamentalist local government. Since the election of the new municipal governor, Bekir Yıldız—a hard-liner of the Virtue Party—Sincan was now operating as the “site” of the normalization of such views within their *resistive locales*, and thus the town itself was both the “object” and the “instrument” of political struggle.⁴ Exhibitions for religious publications, gatherings and meetings as well as conferences for solidarity and public cohesiveness were organized regularly to make Sincan as an active milieu to reproduce a unique culture. In other words, the town of Sincan *de facto* became a “powerful locale” for constant religious indoctrination in an attempt to fabricate a “public sphere” of its own.⁵

Of many attempts to spatially appropriate Sincan, the prodigiously built canopy that mimics the silhouette of Kubbet-ül Sahra, *Dome of the Rock*, as one of the most divine places in Jerusalem, *Kudüs*, deserves a special attention. Simulating a sacred locale in Middle East and ridiculously made out of regular “plastic fiber”, the simulacrum of Kubbet-ül Sahra was in fact built for public gatherings and *Ramadan*-fasting ceremonies as a communal service of the local government. Located right at the middle of the city square the tent once again seemed to threaten the civic character of the secular public sphere and transformed it into a mythical “locale” for “conservative retreat” as a powerful symbol in the re-enactment of the fundamentalist project of Islam. The choice of city square was no coincidence yet an intelligently driven political act—the outcome of a long lasting will to manufacture an independent *community*,⁶ detached from the reminiscence of the Kemalist ideology for Turkish Modernism and secular state.⁷ If the colossal arrival of army was to incapacitate the “religious idiosyncrasy”, the simulacrum of mosque in the hearth of civic domain was again to seek “historical legitimization” through the “collective memory” of Turkish people and their religious leitmotifs in order to popularize the Islamic discourse.⁸

The canopy, in this sense, becomes a theatrical stage on which counter-histories are now explicitly represented. Here, the tent is more than a material quantity as it gives way to almost a new mode of visual iconography that turns religious myths into material testimonies and

thus becomes an ideological script to revive such “confiscated memories”.⁹ With a series of fragmented information the spatial identity of Sincan is now being reduced to a series of schizophrenic experiences as the Kubbet-ül *Sahra*-like canopy produces a form of retrospective images and delusive architectonic settings. What was constructed in Sincan was an attempt to put differently the act of remembering in the metamorphosing landscape of Turkey, and to foster a deceitful visual text that constantly narrates the virtues of Islamic past to cultivate a counter identity.¹⁰ Of many ideological events that occurred in the tent, the meeting for the celebration of Jerusalem deserves a special attention. On January 31, 1997, four days prior to, so called “military exercise”, Municipal Governor Bekir Yildiz and the Iranian Ambassador to Turkey, Muhammed Riza Bagheri, attended a special gathering organized by the Municipality. Decorated by the colossal portraits and flags of some fundamentalist groups and organizations like “Hamas” and “Hizbullah”, outlawed by the State, the simulacrum of Kubbet-ül *Sahra* was converted into an ideological architectonic in the very material particularities of this fraudulent yet quite effective “divine emporium”. Followed by the provocative speeches of Yildiz and Bagheri, both called for Islamic law and order—*İleria*, militant groups in traditional costumes, performed a short drama that portrayed the Turkish army as aggressor and anti-Islam. Calling for an *Intifada*-like civic upheaval against Kemalist ideology of “secularism and civic society” the play ended up with a very dramatic scene in which stone throwing young believers were shot to death by the Turkish troops. Almost simulating the Palestinian uprising and such civic resistance and passive violence against “oppression, despotism, and domination” the “Jerusalem Night” had a tremendously nationwide effect on Turkey.

Yet, the outgrowing tension increased on the 3rd of February when a TV reporter, who was making an investigation on Sincan’s fundamentalist communities, was brutally beaten seemingly by an Islamisist militant right in front of the canopy. In fact, reporter’s misfortunate confrontation was no coincidence. This was rather an “unlawful yet self-referentially legitimate” means of interplay that was to reveal the unspoken, the invisible, and the unrecognized. She, as a “secular” “professional” “woman”, was penetrating by channels of media into something that she was not yet a part of: “the sacred territory of the simulacrum of Kubbet-ül *Sahra*”. To put it more explicitly, the tent was no longer a *neutral space* and any forms of its trespassing could have been disciplined accordingly. Trespassing is a form of “violation” in spatial and social terms and it calls for the restoration of “privacy” in all means. As part of bourgeois culture, Jameson suggests, privacy legitimizes itself through rituals, and the codes of conduct, and thus it can be confounded through the public removals of the unlawful acts toward “body”.¹¹ The materiality of any abstract entity, yet finds its corporeal presence in space, and Kubbet-ül *Sahra*, in this sense, is not a “locale” for religious service, but the representation of the very *body of God* and its arcane domains.

The violation of territory amplified the fact that the canopy in fact represents the fall of *civic public sphere* into seductive architectonic settings that are to design self-sustaining social groups and their spatial parameters. Almost fabricating a forceful discrimination and division between “us” and “other” or “in and out”, in this sense, Sincan’s own Kubbet-ül *Sahra* stresses on fragmented yet fragile social cohesiveness and identities. As clearly manifested in this mosque-like yet artificially divine “space” the community of Sincan is only tangible, material, and visible within their politically confined “locales”. The identity of Sincan community is also exclusively legitimate through such simulative spatial enclaves that are specialized in certain commemorative and festive occasions constructed within the boundaries of their ideological preferences. Its architecturally poor streets as well as its main square now become an ideological “interface” that would allow their religious leitmotifs through autonomous, self-referential, and disobedient events, rituals, and

ceremonial acts. Cultivating their own referential matrix the act of disobedience here, for some, can be defined as a *legitimate resistance* and thus a *counter-hegemonic insurgency*.

Sounds paradoxical as it maybe, however, Gramscian account of “resistance” seems to cease its moral and emancipatory faculties in the Turkish context: Sincan’s very act of religious recovery forcefully stresses on “community” and complete “submission” to supreme power and *İleria*, rather than “critical self” and “collective and democratic authority”.¹² Remembering the fact that Gramscian resistance in fact anticipates “emancipation through critical self”, one may suggest here that Sincan’s case rather calls for “emancipation through religious doctrine”. The very notion of *critical self* and *public sphere* in Sincan, in other words, can henceforth dissolve in the ephemerality of “ideological spaces”, and in turn yield to desired *communities*. By bringing the two domains together—the traditional community and the religious consciousness—Kubbet-ül *Sahra* genuinely attached traditional experiences and values onto the reality of postindustrial Turkey. Notwithstanding, what was experienced in this small town was not alone an exercise of social change but a *new form of conservatism* that releases its own culture of dogmatism through its social and spatial cartography: the sense of *community*.¹³

The community belief, as Hummon suggests, is “best understood as interpretive, socially-shared perspectives, learned from community ideology and socially-structured experiences”.¹⁴ In fact, the knowledge of communities originates within simple experiences in *locales* as experiences are rather scanned through their social and material surroundings for the process of enculturation.¹⁵ Its knowledge also involves an imaginary process in which a distinct construction of community ideal takes place. Therefore, community is in fact “a presentation of reality rather than a simple reflection of reality”.¹⁶ Community identity, on the other hand, is a process of positioning of self in reality as a symbolic placement that defines the person in a given social context. Through self-realization the social agent identifies itself with a certain value, type, quality, or simply with significant objects as they elevate a sense of belonging and attachment.¹⁷ The undesired confrontation between the secular anchorwoman and the Islamisist militant then should be re-examined within the confinements of community. Representing two distinct groups, one associated with “secularism and the bureaucratic state’s authority”, and the other with “the teachings of Islam and the authority of God”, their self-realization is built upon the conflict of interests. The tent, for the fundamentalist militiaman, means more than its functional construction; it is no longer a “public service”, yet a referential replica of divine and the mighty authority of *his God*, all visible in the very essence of material space. Confining religious values and its importance in the collective memory of Turkish people, the tent simulates a special social and spatial matrix for him, and its violation should be disciplined on the basis of his personal and collective identity.

Self’s identity and thus collective resistance, however, reflect themselves not only in material conditions of everyday life, but also in symbolic codes as reflected in the everyday language—discourse. Believing that discourse and the discursive practices are pure forms of ideology forging a sense of attachment, a community may thus be defined as a discursive “interpretation of self that utilizes the best of community as a locus of attachment or an image for self-characterization”.¹⁸ Therefore, the power of Sincan community should be understood not only in its functional utility, but also in its “ideological” meaning: It is more of a symbolic enterprise, and a moral perspective that would frame such social relations from the point of ideological references. The simulacrum of Kubbet-ül *Sahra*, in that sense, ideationally contribute to this interpretative symbolic process built upon the competing values of “our ideology” and “others” as well as “with us” and “someone else” to manufacture its own moral system.

In light of these findings, one may suggest here that the simulacrum of Kubbet-ül Sahara in fact seems to reverse symbolically what Kemalist ideology has done over time on *space*. Turkish Modernism replaces “religious rhetoric” and “skill” with “critical knowledge” built upon the codes of *Enlightenment*; replaces “local”, and “indigenous” with “international”, “standardized”, and “industrial”; and finally replaces “community” and “dogmatism” with “public sphere and centralized bureaucratic authority”. Yet the community of Sincan may now provide the necessary means to reverse this undesired historical trajectory towards an operational mode that needs the conventional laws of fundamental Islam and its spatial remainder. However, the constant use of historical texts to accommodate conventions into space was not a new enterprise. Post-industrial disjunction, as Jameson has suggested, already attempted such utopian languages into the sign systems of space. According to him, spatial practice was now reduced to such incomplete experiences of pure and unrelated presents in time. The discourse on Kubbet-ül Sahara, in this sense, no longer represents a complete detour of its “history”; it rather becomes a simulacrum of underlying social contradictions and confrontations as “post-industrial intertextuality”.²⁰ The construction of intertextuality stands for nothing but a process of transformation of present into sheer images, pseudo-events, and spectacles through *simulation*.²¹ Considering the fact that the symbolic forms to restore past in present involves no visible origins that would link up with the points of rational reference system Sincan’s very Kubbet-ül Sahara as a simulation of itself is to produce nothing more than its own retrospective images in seeking power for challenge and counter-violation.²²

To sum up so far, the whole confrontation on Kubbet-ül Sahara, therefore, was not about its “imaginary real”, but its “discursive power” that would cultivate a form of illegitimate authority—the authority of the “villain”, the “unrecognized”, and the “other”. In other words, the simulacrum of this decorated tent was not alone an ideological information or the material reinvention of Islam-based space, yet to violate the secular territories of the State for the possibilities of social change. Here, the underlying issue, however, is power; power that takes place between the warring parties of “secular authority and the ever-growing “Islamic indoctrination”.

However, what was not foreseen or underestimated by the local administration was the overruling authority and its legitimate apparatuses of armed forces to control, discipline, and dominate. The state’s “authority and its disciplinary instruments” were soon in this intricate interplay. Once empowered by the Islamisist Virtue Party’s ideologues, Municipal Governor Bekir Yılmaz was soon abandoned by his comrades and dismissed from his position upon the Interior Minister’s military-backed intervention. He was then taken into custody by the National Police on the 5th of February and detained on February 13, 2000. Sentenced to more than four years imprisonment on the 15th of October he was accused by the prosecutors of the State Security Court as separatist and anti-revolutionary. The drama that took place in “local” Kubbet-ül Sahara also faced the court: the players were sentenced to imprisonment for insulting the Turkish Army.

It is also interesting to note that by the help of secular media, and public’s anger and frustration Iranian Ambassador to Turkey and the Iranian Counselor in Istanbul were both declared as *persona non grata* and invited to leave the country on the 20th of February. In fact, the year of 1997 became an arena for political insurgencies: Through the influences of the *Western Study Group*—organized by the Turkish General Staff to investigate and pinpoint the nationwide fundamentalist growth and its geographical enclaves—the effective intrusion of the Turkish Army into politics was about the change the entire course of the Coalition Government.²³ The increasing tension between the Army and the government came to an end by the resignation of Necmettin Erbakan, the Prime Minister of the Coalition Government and the President of the Islamisist Virtue Party, on 18 June 1997.

The case of Sincan, in this sense, draws our attention to the role of ideas, and social relations in subversive political practices and the simulacrum of Kubbet-ül Sahara can be defined, in Foucault’s own words, as a *war of position* between the opposing parties.²⁴ What has been experienced since then in fact represents a form of gradual transition towards a mode of multi-dimensional yet contested culture of which such *parties* can stand side by side. Having a counter-revolutionary potential, on the other hand, Kubbet-ül Sahara suggests an opposition in the form of partial and fragmented resistance and revolt against the *dominant*. For some, it is a mode of cultural politics through which space is no longer an emancipatory public sphere but a decorum for “civic breakdown”.

NOTES

¹See, “Cumhuriyetin 75. Yılı”, ed. F. Aksin, Cit.3 (Istanbul:YKY, 1999).

²The Turkish Military has overruled the civil governments for three times in 1960, 1972, and 1980 and, the consequences of the February 4th incident had a tremendous impact on Turkey. For the role of military: William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986).

⁴John Fiske, *Power Plays Power Works* (London-New York: Verso, 1993).

⁵For counter-revolutionary public spheres in Turkey: Candaş Bilal and Güven Arif Sargin and Belgin Turan, “Islam, Modernity, and the Politics of Public Realm in Turkey: the Kocatepe Complex of Ankara,” *ACSA European Conference Proceedings*, Berlin, (1997): 451-54.

⁶Community can be translated into Turkish as *cemaat* and has significantly religious connotations.

⁷Ankara would be the place for constructing the national identity, where the republican Turkish élite would nurture a culture of modernity, which would be presented as a model for the whole nation.” Candaş Bilal and Güven Arif Sargin and Belgin Turan, *ibid.* (1997): 451.

⁸“...memory is a natural outcome of concrete social experiences and associated with specific spatio-temporal frameworks...experience and remembrance are always implanted in surrounding spatial forms and cultivate a collective memory that could replace the abstract notion of history that is itself an invented tradition and imaginary narration. Memory crises out of spatio-temporal ruptures, therefore, can only be resolved by establishing “counter-memories resisting the dominant coding of images and representation and recovering differences that official memory has erased.” Güven Arif Sargin, “The Architecture of Displacement: Notes on Monuments, Memories and Identities of a Nation-Capital-Ankara,” *Others Connections Conference Proceedings*, Beirut, (1999): . Also see, Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago-London, 1992). And, Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994).

⁹A counter-revolutionary discourse has been developing amid intelligentsia and performing its spatial desire since the early 1950s...some scholarly attempts now begin to analyze critically the republican period in terms of the Ottoman heritage and Islamic codes. They now propose a critique of the political stances associated with Turkey’s shift from East to West, with all their ritualistic, symbolic, and aesthetic manifestations...Amid a broad range of views and political positions, however, the central argument revolves around the view that the mode of Turkish Enlightenment has constantly erased the pre-republican history and the traditional values of the Turkish society. What is obvious in this hermetic situation is that despite the repeated attempts of the republican élite to dominate the cultural landscape spatial and political developments now have been shaped by a much more complicated net of interactions and conflicting interests. Güven Arif Sargin, “The Architecture of Displacement: Notes on Monuments, Memories and Identities of a Nation-Capital-Ankara,” *Others Connections Conference Proceedings*, Beirut, (1999). Also, Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1994).

¹⁰For a detailed survey on the metamorphosis of collective memory in the Turkish context, see, Güven Arif Sargin, *ibid.* (1999).

¹¹Fredrick Jameson, "Is Space Political", *Anyplace* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995:192-205).

¹²Gramscian theory provides a subversive practice of cultural politics because he defines a form of reactionary public sphere for the growth of opposition and resistance. However, hegemony suggests a positive trajectory through critical self and collective consciousness and based on the notion of "emancipation". Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, (New York: International Publishers, 1983).

¹³New Conservatism, however, is not a new enterprise but a seductive form of postindustrial disjunction, according to Habermas. Sultanbeyli in Istanbul exposes similar patterns in its way to become a religious enclave. However, the most important domain among its residences is the property relation as a bounding issue. The social hierarchy as well as its religious identity is all compelled within speculation and the distribution of property. See, Oguz Isik and Melih Pinarcioglu, "Sultanbeyli Notlari", *Birikim, Kenete Yarilma* (1999): 47-52.

¹⁴David Hummon, *Commonplaces: Community Ideology and Identity in American Culture*, (New York State University of New York Press, 1990: 6).

¹⁵John Fiske, *Power Plays Power Works*, (London-New York: Verso, 1993).

¹⁶David Hummon, *ibid.* (1990): 9.

¹⁷David Hummon, *ibid.* (1990)

¹⁸David Hummon, *ibid.* (1990): 142.

¹⁹Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²⁰Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (New York: Duke University Press, 1994).

²¹Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext(e) Inc., 1983).

²²For simulation and community architecture and its ideological instrumentalism see, Güven Arif Sargin, *Myths and Ideology in Middle Landscape: Politics in the Perception of Nature in American Environmental Design Discourse*, (Madison: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1986).

²³*Western Study Group* represents the Kemalist ideology of Modernism. Regarding Islam as a backward insurgency, the Turkish General Staff also reproduced the republican élites' desire of West. Yet, its legitimacy is still under question.

²⁴Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

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