Loss of modesty

The adventure of Muslim family from mahalle to gated community

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Loss of modesty: The adventure of Muslim family from mahalle to gated community

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INTRODUCTION

There is a Turkish proverb which encapsulates the interconnection between the profane world and eternal life, linking the religious and profane domains of life to each other: “A place here, a faith hereafter.” This is an incomplete sentence, having no verb, but generally completed with the words “necessary” or “important”: It is necessary to have a place here and (“true”) faith hereafter or the important thing is to have a place here, and (“true”) faith hereafter. This small sentence is a sort of formula for eternal happiness: A place is the very base of profane life, while a faith is the base of divine life. However, place and faith do not contradict but rather complete each other. They are substantially inseparable, because the temporary profane world is the place to have, to protect and where to accumulate the faith necessary to be happy in the eternal afterworld. A human being needs a place in the world to constitute his/her happiness in the afterworld, in other words in paradise. Thus this proverb constitutes a continuity between here and hereafter. There is no in-betweenness, here and hereafter exists in each other. A place is the key of happiness not only here but also hereafter. Thus faith is necessary to form a place to prepare oneself for the eternal hereafter.

Seeing this proverb in many advertisements, those were made to promote the new living spaces built for new middle and upper class religious families, I have always been felt forced to rethink the meaning of strings of concepts such as religiosity, secularity, profane, sacred and Islamism or political Islam. Thus, while writing this thesis all these concepts were like fiery marbles not very easy to play with. My field research always forced me to reflect on these concepts as if they share a certain base within their practical meanings and usages in the daily life although they are generally defined as opposite to each other in the theoretical discussions. Consequently, although my questions were always (and sometimes too) general, the answers that I received were often surprising.

This thesis asks two main questions which have been formulated countless times within the framework of many academic disciplines. First, how does urban life affect religiosity, and then, how does religiosity expresses itself in a modern urban environment... I added another one, which has
generally been asked as a part of urban historiography researching on the relatively distant past of the cities: How do religions transform cities?

The last question, especially if it is formulated within this wording, sounds like problematising the phenomena in the early periods of world history when religions emerged. Each religion has understood and formulated the world in its own way and rebuilt the cities along its approach to distribution of justice, distribution, morality, etc (Eliade, 1987). However, the constitutive power of religions is categorised as a historical phenomenon with the emergence of secular modernity. It is as if a past episode of the world history is never being repeated or revealed again in the future. From this perspective, religion in the city can remain as a figure within the authentic cultures of cities. That is the only role any religion could play in a modern, secular, and rational city.

However, current discussions related to the concepts modernity, secularity and religion highlight that the role of religion in the contemporary world is rapidly evolving (Casanova, 1994; Caputo, 2001; Ledewitz, 2009; Sayyad, 2010; Habermas, 2010). Religions, which are squeezed in individual conscious, home, church or mosque in the rational urban sphere of the modern world come back ambitiously and energetically to streets, squares, social relationships and politics. Furthermore, they demand to increase their visibility in all the cities, villages and homes of the globe benefiting from the opportunities of modern technology.

I preferred to interpret this phenomenon, the increasing visibility of religion in the urban public sphere, as the re-profananation of religion instead of focusing on the de-secularisation (Berger, 1999) of cities or de-privatisation of religions (Casanova, 1994). Agamben (2007) defines profanation as an act to demolish the separation between the sacred and the profane, putting the sacred to the profane usage. In this approach, there is no necessity to define the terms secularism and religiosity in binary opposition, because religion as a tool to organise and regulate the profane world is profaned by religious people in their practice. Considering this line of thinking and following Talal Asad’s (2003) historical and philosophical conceptualisation of secularism, I suggest that at least until they were disconnected from the domain of profane world by secular and rational modernity, all the religions served and seemed as methods for the regulation and organisation of the profane daily life. In other words, religions were profane until they were sanctified by secularism. Thus, in my research I tried to see how religion and religiosity appear in the regulation of daily life and how it resonates with the secular establishment of social and political domains in the profane urban sphere. In short, how do religious people profanize religion in a secular world? How do religiosity
interact with secularism in this process? Although it seems paradoxical, I think profanation of religiosity force us to rethink the nature and the meaning of the term secularisation.

This thesis focuses on the question “how” rather than the “why”: How does religiosity manifest itself in a super-modern urban life? How does it interact with the physical and administrative forms of secular and rational modernity? Thus it aims to understand the mechanisms, dynamics and forms of the re-profanation of religion. However, this re-profanation is not only caused by the ambitions of religion and religiosity to join in the profane world and breaking its sacred chains, but also by the failures of the secular understanding of the administration of urban life. In my case, when an Islamic party (RP) suggested and applied a housing project as a model to solve the inextricable informal housing problem of Istanbul, the secular actors of politics stigmatised this project as being a “religious ghetto,” because it was imagined by a political actor supported by the religious segments of the society. Thus Basaksehir, my fieldwork, emerged as a living space identified as per the religiosity of its inhabitants by both the Islamic party and its contestants. In other words, the borders of religiosity (as a living space and style) is constructed in an unending negotiation and contestation between religiosity and secularism in the urban sphere. Thus, the definitions and contents of religiosity and secularism cannot be constant, they continually and dynamically change within each other. None of them can be defined without referring to the other. Following this conceptualisation, instead of making a definition of religiosity in this thesis, I observe and explain religiosity via its relationship with the secular understanding of politics, daily life, culture, etc.

The field work of this research, Basaksehir, at the same time, served as a laboratory to the different actors of political Islam (not only to political parties but also religious communities). In this new town and living space the actors of political Islam experienced their administrative capacity, market potentiality, and customer-voter loyalty in the context of an emerging, experimental life style space with many novel aspects for the general and conventional understanding of religiosity. With time, this life style started to affect not only Istanbul but also all the towns of Turkey. Considering that the mayor of Istanbul who planned Basaksehir is now the prime minister of Turkey, Tayyip Erdogan, and the executive manager of municipality in housing projects of that period Erdogan Bayraktar is now the minister of urban affairs, this cannot be considered just a coincidence. I argue that Tayyip Erdogan and his colleagues who are leading the new generation of the Islamic party (AKP) plan the huge ongoing urban transformation movement through their ability to read the demands of religious segments of society relating to urban life and sphere. Thus, looking at Basaksehir as their very first experiment in building a city, it is possible to see the changes concerning the general demands over
the city and what the role of religiosity is in the changing content of urban landscape which seems widely supported by the religious/conservative segments of society.

The historical background of Basaksehir goes back to the mid 1990s. In that period, the RP politicised the demands of the raising new religious middle class through their municipal policies especially in the big cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Kayseri. The RP developed a service-based, clientelistic local politics responding efficiently to the needs of this raising religious middle class (Dogan, 2007). It can be said that the AKP systematised and thus consolidated this politics remained by the RP. This service-based understanding of local politics coincided with a huge political power, which is unprecedented in modern Turkish political history. On the strength of this power, the AKP makes dramatical changes not only in the landscape of cities, but also in the administrative architecture of Turkey, because its urban transformation policies needed radical changes in many laws which directly determine the character of state administration (Kahraman, 2013). Thus, the case of Basaksehir gives many clues on how an Islamic party imagines a city as a modern living space in response to the needs of religious individuals. In other words, this study aims to explain how the concept of modern city and religiosity come together in the imagination and practice of both the religious segments of society and the leading actors of political Islam: What does such a city consist of as regards its social, political, legal and administrative setup and what is the place of religion in this setup?

At this point, it is necessary to specify the definition of Islamism regarding its relationship with Muslim religiosity. To be honest, the hardest question while researching and writing this thesis was about this specification: What is religiosity and what is its relationship with political Islam or Islamism? Following Kara’s (2004, 2011) historiography of Islamism I decided, that while it maybe true that all religious people cannot be categorised as Islamists in Turkey, at the same time, Muslim religiosity cannot be defined without referring Islamism since Islamism within its short story constantly appropriated and changed the content and the definition of Muslim religiosity, at least in Turkey.

Islamism was one of the three main political tactics (the remaining two are Ottomanizm and nationalism) which emerged in an undesirable present (in the period of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire) in order to construct a desirable future (a new empire with Muslim ummah) by using the remains of a yearned for past. For the first Islamists, the Ottoman Empire was collapsing because of two main reasons linked to each other: First, imitation of the West and second, misunderstanding of
Islam (Kara, 2004, 41-45). For them, the modernisation attempts of the Ottoman Empire during its last two centuries did not work because Ottomans could not understand that the core problem was not wanting for modern technology or sciences but the corruption of morality and getting distant from the true path of Islam. They were not only suggesting a reform within Islam, but also trying to revive Islam as a renewed ontological resource to reconstruct politics, economy and culture in the Ottoman world (Kara, 2011).

Defining Islamism through this historiographic acceptances, I define Islamism as a project to rationalise and modernise the Muslim religiosity. Considering the unchallenged raise of political Islam since the 1990s, I think it is no longer possible to refer to religiosity independently from or undetermined by Islamism. Thus, whenever I refer to religiosity especially in the context of Basaksehir, I mean at the same time a political designation of religiosity formed in the centre of the contestation and negotiation between political Islam and secular modernisation.

Lastly, while observing Basaksehir as a whole, a city having a distinctive landscape within its historical, legal, social, cultural, and economic aspects, I follow Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of the term landscape (1991). His explanation of landscape as a product of a mode of production in the sense of economy explains why Basaksehir developed as a gated community town and became one of the most visible segregation space in Istanbul. According to him landscape is directly produced within the production relationships of any society. In the case of Basaksehir, the landscape of the town within its social, physical, and legal segregation seems directly produced in parallel to the “organised industrial zone” type of economic production. On the other hand, this conceptualisation of landscape does explain Basaksehir’s segregated nature to a degree. However when one thinks of Lefebvre’s (2008) and Harvey’s (2008) conceptualisations of the right to the city it is possible to explain why and how the image of “Muslim ghetto” cannot be only a political but also an economic and social investment.

Organisation of the chapters

In the first chapter I widely explained my methodology to conduct field research as well as narrate its findings. This chapter explains my methodological experiments in the field as a journalist trying to use her journalistic experience to conduct an ethnographic research. Although the title of this chapter, “Negotiation as a research methodology”, seems ambitious, it indeed focuses on why this research was a sort of negotiation with the actors of the field not only at field research level, but also at the level of the writing process.
The focus of the second chapter is the physical landscape of Basaksehir. In this chapter I tried to interpret the physical signs distinctive (e.g. fence by fence gated communities) to Basaksehir within their historical, economical and administrative backgrounds.

The third chapter explains the foundation story of Basaksehir. This story at the same time could be read as the recent history of political Islam focusing on its transformation along with its appropriation of administrative capacity starting with municipalities.

The social profile of Basaksehir is explained in the fourth chapter. The main resource of this chapter are the in-depth or short, formal and informal interviews that I made in Basaksehir. Furthermore, observations and daily life experiences that I had as an inhabitant/researcher in Basaksehir are widely used to describe the daily life and its organisation in this gated town.

The fifth chapter explains how and in what sort of contexts religiosity does matter within the interactions of different social, economic and cultural groups. In this chapter I also describe the transformation of religiosity in such a modern urban sphere throughout a collective religious ritual, the feast of sacrifice.

Since the beginning, I was totally unwilling to write anything related to gender in this thesis, thinking whenever someone talks about Muslim religiosity the gender issue comes as an over emphasised issue. I made my best to avoid writing chapter six with a focus on gender relations in Basaksehir. However, at the end the narration brought me to such a point that I decided to assign a chapter to this issue. Yet the real concern of this chapter is not discussing the gender relationship as a distinctive problematic, instead I saw gender relations as one of the grounds of the transformation of religiosity. Thus, the aim of this chapter is not to analyse gender relations in Basaksehir, but to analyse the transformation of religiosity in the framework of gender.

Finally, the main focus of the seventh and last chapter is the perceptions of the inhabitants of Basaksehir about the town and the life style formed there by the new middle class religious families. I titled this chapter around the term “discontent” to highlight the temporariness of Basaksehir as a stigma and life style. Many of the families, especially the most wealthy ones seem to leave Basaksehir soon for more luxury gated communities and residences closer to the city centre and more distant from the lower classes. They will leave their living space one more time apparently because they want to be in the centre and want to appropriate the centre of city and society. On the other hand, many of Basaksehir’s religious residents think this town does not
represent a religious life and they do not want to live here anymore. However the resources and reasons of criticism come from opposite sides. While some of them thinks this “rich” life style harms the very nature of religiosity, some of them thinks Basaksehir is not rich enough to well represent Islam’s understanding of beauty and civilisation.

I think the findings of this thesis related to Basaksehir will be disappearing in a couple of years, because Istanbul is changing very rapidly mainly throughout the demands of the rising religious/conservative middle class. However, this temporary space of urban religiosity provides many clues about the future of religiosity as an urban life style. Thus, I hope and think the findings of this thesis relating to the characteristics and tendencies of the emerging religious life style will be the main contribution to the anthropological literature related to Islam and Islamism in the contemporary world. Focusing on the dynamics shaping the basic forms and themes of this urban middle class religious life, this thesis at the same time point out the possible tension lines within the different understandings of religiosity.
I. Methodology: Negotiation as a research methodology

Realised in the mid-1990s, Başakşehir was the first housing project of the Islamist RP (Welfare Party), built to convince its supporters and the whole of Turkey that the party could administer a town as well as manage a state. Ever since its foundation and settlement, Başakşehir has been the subject of a public debate concerning the Islamist lifestyle. However, as this housing project is in every sense far removed from the city of Istanbul, information about it is mainly based on hearsay. Stranger still is that the way that the RP was often the topic of debate and conversation when it was in opposition, but that since political Islam came to power in 2000 it appears to have become virtually invisible.

Everyone in Turkey is aware of the existence of Başakşehir, although it is not the sort of destination towards which tourists head or where local people go to have a good time. Başakşehir is like a destination on the front of a bus, where you realise with disappointment that the bus you are waiting for does not stop in the district you wanted to go to; otherwise it is just a name you might come across in the newspapers among the real estate advertising.

The gecekondu (shanty) districts and the predicament of the residents, who are under constant threat of losing their homes, has always interested me:¹ I had been involved with a series of activist movements concerning urban renewal before I began working on the issue of how religiosity had evolved in Istanbul. It was only after I began my research on religiosity in the context of the city that I realised there were vital questions that I had not considered at all: Why was opposition to urban renewal not on the scale we expected in the gecekondu districts when their residents represented such a large portion of the urban population? How was it that both large and small political and social movements could be broken up and dissolved so easily? Instead as activists and journalists, we were focusing on what was happening to the people in the present and not so much on people’s expectations for the future.

I discovered the difference between the activist who tries to protect the city, and the pragmatist who does his or her best to survive in the city and earn a living, when I first arrived in Başakşehir. As an activist, I was trying to protect the city as it was without even considering the conditions of my own survival. In this role of mine, the city had a privileged position and belonged in an idealised

¹ As an independent journalist I have written many articles on the process of urban transformation in Istanbul for Express Magazine. I have also participated in organisations in gecekondu neighbourhoods in the struggle against the destruction of people’s homes.
category and I resisted changes planned by the authorities, which were always much bigger than my individual will. For citizens living in the city, however, the city is more than this: It is where people earn a living and invest in their future. It is also where interests clash and is a place of permanent change. Furthermore, my resistance to change in the city was fast becoming a negotiation tool for the people who lived in areas earmarked for demolition by the city administration. The main negotiation was set up between property owners and the city administration, with me positioned between them as translator, communicator, and advocate for the cause of the property owners.

The error of a position between being an activist and a pragmatist first became clear to me when I asked a woman what she wanted to do with her *gecekondu*. She responded, “I want to destroy my own *gecekondu* and build a new apartment; if the government does it I will lose half of my land.” She continued by explaining that she did not have any problem with plans for new apartments, a regular city, a clean environment, and so on. She was resisting the urban renewal plans of the city administration because she wanted a bigger share in the future of the city. This dialogue was extremely enlightening as to why local urban opposition stays at the neighbourhood level and finds it difficult to collaborate on a larger scale to gain a more prominent voice in the future of the city.

As a journalist familiar with the political history of Turkey, I found there was another aspect of the urban renewal process, which related to the rise of political Islam in Turkey. When the RP first emerged as a powerful political party in the 1990s, with it came banal analysis that mentioned *gecekondu* areas and urban poverty as the main reason for raising the issue of religiosity and Islamism in Turkey’s big cities. According to this analysis, the RP alongside religious communities created charity networks to attract the urban poor to their political projects. Therefore, the main supporters of political Islam were the urban poor living in the *gecekondu* areas. The destruction of the *gecekondu* areas by the AKP (Justice and Development Party), which is the representative of the renewed political Islam, was therefore paradoxical: Why should a political party destroy the homes of its main supporters, and does that mean that the AKP is destroying its own social base?

Consequently, the questions I formulated when I began working in Başakşehir, had two main sources: First, was my experience with local opposition in the urban renewal process, which posed the question of what people generally expect from urban life. The second question concerned Islamism: What does political Islam mean to city-dwellers, and in particular, what does it suggest to those who are devout?
I had a serious problem regarding the second question: In a country like Turkey, where a tough, new political debate between secularism and religion has taken a new turn in almost every period, religious politics become extremely specific. That is why it was not possible for me to define religious piety with, for instance, going to the mosque, performing ritual prayers, or with the veiling of women. This is because Islamism had introduced a political content to religiosity since the second half of the nineteenth century, and this content has become an important part of various political conflicts since the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Beginning with the constitution, the state regulates religious life to the finest detail, and the scale of reaction to these regulations by religion deepens the political essence still further.

In the case of Başakşehir, on the other hand, this district had been stigmatized in every sense from the period of its foundation, caught within the conflict between political Islam and modern Turkey’s “ideal” of secularism. This is because Başakşehir was one of the first fruits to grow out of the efforts of the ideological content of political Islam, finding a form as an administrative and economic investment. It is exactly for this reason that secular society in Turkey brandished it a no-go area and why it was ignored, ruthlessly criticised, and virtually absent from the map. At first glance, it seemed as though the distance of Başakşehir from the centre of Istanbul was the real reason for this exclusion. However, when I first went to live in Başakşehir, I realised that this exclusion was reciprocal. With the help of physical distance, the construction of a self-enclosed style of living was the choice of the people who lived in Başakşehir.

I.1. Moving in: Negotiating Başakşehir

Until I made my first excursion to Başakşehir, I had never thought of living there, even for research purposes. The first trip I made to the area was by car. I was there for about three hours, wandering around on foot, and found that I always seemed to arrive back at the same square. I figured that the only way to get to know the district was to live there, as despite having walked around for three hours, I had seen virtually nothing of life. I knew that the dwellings were not empty, and the size of apartment blocks and the curtains hanging at the windows indicated that the population was not small. However, I did not catch sight of any of the people that lived in the apartments, the walls between which appeared to insulate each apartment from the next and each block from another; and the inhabitants from the world itself. The few cafés and parks I discovered, which I found by asking locals where the young people went and what they did, were also completely empty. The security
gates made these communities less than inviting, particularly as precluding my entry was a question I was unable to answer, “Who are you visiting?”

My research really began when I temporarily relocated to Başakşehir. Posing as a single woman looking for a flat, my objective was to get behind the seemingly impenetrable walls and learn what procedure was necessary to make a life for oneself there. I talked to real estate agents in Başakşehir for almost two weeks, but it seemed impossible for them to find a flat suitable for me. The excuses the agents made about why they could not find suitable accommodation for me included an explanation that the flats were for families, they were too big for me, and the owners did not want to rent to a single woman. I could not even persuade the agents with the title “university lecturer,” as they continued to insist that I would not be comfortable living in Başakşehir. Finally, one of the agents suggested that I went to see a woman who dealt in real estate; she was “similar to me” I was told, and may be able to help me find a suitable place to live. Incidentally, it was in Başakşehir that I first noted the use of the word “similarity” as a means of categorisation. Once I began interviewing, however, I understood better how decisive the concept of “similarity” was: The real estate agent to whom I was directed was a young woman “similar to me,” who was bringing up her children by herself and did not wear a headscarf. What was more, she said she could find me a flat in Oyakkent, which was somewhere the other real estate agents seldom ventured, but which the first real estate agent I had visited had originally suggested was the most suitable place for me.

I.2. An unanticipated direction: Oyakkent

Oyakkent was a huge collective housing project carried out by Oyak Construction, a company of the Oyak Armed Forces Pension Fund. For me, one familiar with Turkey’s political history, all the references that the real estate agent who had initially directed me to Oyakkent and sent me to the estate agent “similar to me” had noted, were consistent. This was because throughout the Republic’s political history the army had positioned itself as the protector of the secular regime. Finally, at the end of the 1990s, the army had engaged in a bitter battle with the very political leaders that had established and built Başakşehir with the Welfare Party, the principal partner of the coalition government formed in 1996. By 2010, this fight had long since ended on the visible face of politics, and Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Welfare Party during this period, had quit the political scene. However, Tayyip Erdogan, who as mayor at the time, founded the Justice and Development Party while he was in prison and became prime minister immediately after his release. My being
shown Oyakkent as the most suitable address for me made me understand instinctively that the
swords drawn during the aforementioned fight continued to exist in unexpected forms.

Forced to rent a flat in Oyakkent two weeks into my venture made me far from happy, because my
real aim was to witness the religious life that was evolving in Başakşehir. I need not have feared,
however, as in Oyakkent my research developed in a direction I had not previously anticipated.

I.3. The evolution of a community

Building foundations were in place for Oyakkent in 1997, but for various reasons, it was not until
2010 that the first stage of the project was completed. The initial aim of the project was to provide
retired members of the armed forces with dwellings. Many retired soldiers had invested their
savings in real estate at Oyakkent during the first building stage, but in time, as evidence of
Başakşehir’s religious identity grew, they chose not to live there. With this change of heart and the
pressure of paying off loans against the properties, the retirees had employed estate agents to find
them tenants, but put forward various conditions of the sort of tenants they wished to have: They
were not to wear chadors or headscarves; they had to be “modern,” and have families with only a
few children. For months, the houses and flats remained empty. In the meantime, Oyak
Construction made a change in its administration whereby retired or serving soldiers and their
families were no longer prospective priority buyers. Some military families that had already
invested in Oyakkent had no choice but to rent out their properties to prospective tenants, even
though they did not fit the conditions imposed; others sold their properties. Meanwhile, the success
of Oyak Construction in the building sector, and public confidence in the soundness of the Oyak
dwellings, transformed Oyakkent into a much sought-after housing estate project. Consequently,
religious families were also attracted to Oyakkent, making real-estate investments there and
considering it as an area when looking for a place to rent, and if they found a suitable dwelling,
living there in preference. Around 200 military families continued to live in Oyakkent, mainly
because they lacked mobility because of their economic position, and found themselves in the
minority due to the market conditions explained above. However, these residents continued to have
their say in the administration of the complex, due to Oyakkent’s unique foundational position. In
short, Oyakkent turned into a battleground of lifestyles, between the representatives of an institution
that saw itself as the guardian of secularism and the representatives of religious piety, a group that
was fast becoming the middle-class majority.
In the first two months of the six-month period I spent in Başakşehir, I tried to get to know Oyakkent in order to understand the lifestyle conflict I witnessed there. I was curious to understand how my neighbours could connect with each other, for three main reasons: First, as the whole estate is new it lacks history, both physical and social. There is no trace of former inhabitants for current residents to follow, in order to orientate or anchor themselves within the social and physical character of the place. Second, nobody knows anyone, and, as all the inhabitants come from different neighbourhoods, life experiences, and backgrounds, they do not coincide on the grounds of coming from shared communities. In order to live together and get to know one another, therefore, they would have to invent a common language; a set of codes to understand and empathise with each other’s past and present. Third, while the architectural organisation of Oyakkent is equalitarian in its repetitive characteristics, the verticality of its physical landscape, on the other hand, creates an atmosphere of non-communication. My rhetorical question, therefore, was how residents could overcome the infrastructural and experiential barriers in order to connect to each other and build a social life in Oyakkent.

At first, my observations concerning this question were as follows: First, to become orientated in Oyakkent, getting to know people is secondary to becoming used to the gated community itself. Second, nobody tries to get know anybody. Although the community management organises various informal meetings to bring residents together, attendance is usually minimal. The formal gatherings are not enough to build a common living experience either. Within the gates of the community, there is a small area reserved for neighbourhood meetings, a large garden with a playground for children, and a sports facility for adults, but these are barely used. Residents do not want to use the communal facilities fearing that they will be observed by others, so instead, they make use of the sports’ facilities found in the nearby shopping malls. Third, non-communication appears to be a sort of protection mechanism, whereby the residents of Oyakkent are reluctant for others to get to know them or to get to know others, which is why they do not want to build relationships with their neighbours.

Under these conditions, renting a flat and spending an entire day within the gated community did not mean that I was or felt part of the community (or maybe being a part of this place was nothing more than what I experienced). The men went to work early in the morning and the women, most of whom had children, did not leave their homes. It seemed that people used the large community garden as a car park.
I.4. Getting to know you

A week after I had moved into my flat I began to exchange greetings with my next-door neighbour, a veiled young lady, who had moved to Oyakkent in order that her two young children could be brought up in a safer environment. I explained to her what I was doing in Başakşehir and about my research. She listened to me with great interest and said that she would be happy to help me and, in fact, she had a lot to say about Başakşehir. We decided to organise a number of Quran recitation meetings as a reason to invite people to my neighbour’s home. My neighbour had some relatives who lived in the second-stage Oyakkent development, whom she invited, along with some of the women she had met at the children’s playground.

Among the first gathering of seven women who met at my neighbour’s flat, one woman was from our block and the others were among the group my neighbour had invited from the children’s playground. My neighbour cooked for us all and some of the other women brought along dishes they had made at home. We read the Quran together for half an hour and then we removed our veils and started to talk. As I was the newest face among the group, everybody was waiting for me to tell them something about myself. I introduced myself and told them in general first what I did professionally, only later explaining about my research. Two women in particular, both of Southeastern Anatolian origin were not happy to hear that there was a researcher at the gathering; they remained silent for the rest of the meeting. The others began to tell me about their experiences of Başakşehir: Nobody knows each other; no one intends getting to know each other; public transportation is very bad; Başakşehir makes one feel isolated from the world. I then felt that I needed to ask why they had come here: It was quiet, peaceful, planned, secure, and a good place to raise children, were among the reasons given.

The next meeting took place in another block, and this time the discussion centred on raising children: The women spoke of their concerns about raising their children with moral values while, at the same time, equipping them to take on the challenges of the future. Later we talked about the shopping malls: Which is the cheaper; which has the nicest entertainment features; and the schedules of the shuttles to and from the shopping malls. I asked them how they spent their time: Their schedule was very simple, taking the children to school and picking them up, shopping, and rarely visiting friends or neighbors. They did not take advantage of Başakşehir’s recreational areas, even though the facilities were better there than anywhere else in Istanbul, because the distances were too great and public transportation poor. To get there and then circumnavigate the walls
required too much time and energy. For similar reasons, it was much more expensive to go out in Başakşehir than it was in Istanbul, because one had to go everywhere by taxi.

At the third meeting, the main agenda was the same; raising children. This time, swearing was the topic. The group tried to find a solution to stop children swearing. When I asked what was wrong with children swearing one woman replied, “It is not a moral behaviour. They need to behave as the children of good families.”

These meetings did not last long, I think, in short, because they were all quite boring. I tried not to confine myself to asking questions about Başakşehir, but also to gossip a little about the neighbourhood. However, my attempts at gossiping did not work because the women knew almost nothing about each other or their other neighbours and moreover they did not feel comfortable talking about themselves. The reason for this was not only that they were aware that I was there as a researcher, but also that they did not trust each other; they had no common past and, furthermore, they did not want to share personal information about their past. When I broached the subject with my neighbour, the one I had met at first, she laughed bitterly and said, “Here we are all like you. Everyone is researching each other. No one asks anything so as not to be asked.”

Following these meetings, my heart would sink, as I knew I could not learn anything about Başakşehir in this way: In other words, all I could learn about Başakşehir was what I could glean from these gatherings. Anyway, the meetings soon ended. A couple of weeks later, I happened to meet one of the participants in the elevator. I asked her about the meetings. She said the group had organised something else: She was now under contract with a company and had started to sell underwear from a catalogue door to door. “I thought about you,” she said, “but later decided not to invite you because the other women may not want a researcher around while choosing underwear.”

That meeting in the elevator marked the end of the first stage of my research. I gave up trying to get invited to my neighbours’ homes as it seemed to me that my position as a researcher created formality and prevented my gaining the insight I needed. Instead, I decided to become, as much as possible, part of public life.

I.5. Meeting the public

I made use of two facilities to broaden my fieldwork beyond Oyakkent and gain insight into Başakşehir. One was at the cultural centre in the second-phase area of Başakşehir where I held
interviews with the people I met there. The second was with one of a number of local magazines. The second facility solved many practical problems in that, for instance, I could carry out street interviews with people without trying to explain too much about my troublesome research topic. At the time, it occurred to me that the street interviews could offer an opportunity to continue with my original research. I told the owner of the magazine that I would like to work for him on a voluntary basis, as in this way, I would be able to get to know Başakşehir much better. He agreed, and organised a business card for me. The business card given to me by my boss was useful from a practical point of view in three ways. It was easier to explain what I was doing, if stopped while wandering around with my camera; I stayed up to date with all the activities organised by state institutions and private organisations; and I had opportunities to meet with the organisers and representatives of non-governmental organisations and discuss my research with relative ease.

There was an important reason for my resorting to this method: Previously, when I had first introduced myself, the door would close in my face whenever and to whomsoever I told that I was carrying out research on the subject of Başakşehir and piety. An elderly woman for instance voiced her rage, saying, “We came here to escape everything, and you have found us here too!”

Reporting for the local magazine enabled me to meet people who, although not directly connected with the research agenda, on another level, were at the centre of Başakşehir life. In this context, my job as a reporter helped me to persuade people to meet up and talk, providing me the opportunity to give them more detailed information first about myself and then about my research. For a while, this worked really well.

As I began to meet more people and the number of interviews increased, I realised that I was making a dramatic mistake. I had built my research on the position of religiosity in Başakşehir, yet, here, religious piety was only one facet. A large part of the population of Başakşehir had come from the post-gecekondu districts. Benefiting from progress in the Turkish economy and political Islam’s increased power they had achieved social mobility and become middle class. Consequently, the issue was much deeper than rebuilding religious piety on an urban foundation defined by modern collective-housing architecture. The real problem was creating a new alloy between the values acquired by becoming middle class and the content of the religious piety mentioned above. When I asked people questions about piety, religion appeared as the most determining element of their lives. Yet, when I broadened my point of view and questioned the sort of life they experienced in Başakşehir, religion appeared as only one of the elements regulating life here. The interviews I
conducted in this way were far more productive in proportion to those previously carried out. Moreover, observing Başakşehir through the frame of the new questions I constructed from this perspective, I began to get the impression that the town had transformed religious piety rather than that religious piety was transforming the town.

At this point, I must make a confession: For me, it was not possible to go to Başakşehir as a neutral observer. In the 1990s, when political Islam was surging, I was living as a veiled student. During the February 28 period known as the postmodern coup, I was working as a veiled reporter for a mainstream newspaper. When I arrived in Başakşehir, I had long since abandoned even questioning what sort of relationship remained between me, Islam and political Islam. Therefore, when I arrived in Başakşehir, one particular question to which I wanted to find an answer concerned the dynamics that had brought about political Islam and what kind of transformation it had undergone since the 1990s. My interviews with the pious and middle-class of Başakşehir were giving insight into those dynamics: It was obvious they were not keen on the perception that they were poor and excluded from the city. They had come to Başakşehir to enjoy their recently elevated social position, won through collective political struggle and hard work, which had boosted the national economy while also improving the local economic situation. They did not want their lifestyle judged by the secular lobby, or by those with traditional understandings of piety, who looked down on the conspicuous exhibiting of newly acquired social positions and power. These were educated people, some of whom were high-earners in their chosen careers, and they wanted respect, not only for their religious and ideological backgrounds, but also because of their successes commercially. A woman explained to me how it is possible to merge religious and profane values into one value system: “Allah en iyı nimetlerini ona inananların üzerinde görmek ister.” (“God wants to see his best blessing on the believers.”)

I.6. Public meetings

As the end to the sixth-month period of my research approached, both the administrators and the non-governmental organisations in Başakşehir had become aware of my research. I was invited to a meeting by the Başakşehir Non-Governmental Organization Platform, which wanted to hear about the findings of my research and discuss it. As I was the person expected to talk at the meeting, and anticipating that some of the questions and arguments aimed at my findings could provide answers to some of my questions, I prepared a provocative presentation. In my presentation, I stated that in Başakşehir, I perceived the mixing up of the values of religious piety and middle-class and market
values, and that religious piety had legitimised itself, for instance, with the economic successes of the pious. I explained what I had observed during my stay in Başakşehir: Instead of helping poor neighbours personally, the people of Başakşehir helped charitable organisations, so that they did not have to interact directly with poverty. I announced that the aid raised during the Feast of the Sacrifice went to religious communities instead of directly to the poor, and that the people of Başakşehir were apathetic towards their poverty-stricken neighbours. I pointed out that there is no active “neighbouring” in Başakşehir as people do not want to get to know each other. The exaggerated security measures, such as high walls and gates, make people suspicious about everyone. I pointed out how children who came from the gecekondu areas of Başakşehir were repelled from the parks, and that the people of Başakşehir were becoming more elitist, discriminatory, and exclusionary within the closed-community environment. I said that my research had found that the residents of Başakşehir do not live together with the Kurds, the urban poor, and those who are not of the same religious community as them; religiosity did not seem to have a Unitarian motive among the religious, and even the mosques had become spaces of fragmentation.

I did not receive any negative responses to these findings and criticisms. On the contrary, someone asked whether as a “social scientist” I knew of a formula to develop better neighbour-relations. I shared my findings about the fact that, despite all the investment that had gone into designing the recreational areas, they did not have a social function because of the lack of public transport and the excessive security and supervisory precautions. Again, there was no opposition from the gathering. The only negative reaction, which I had not anticipated, came because of the relatively objective finding regarding where people living in Başakşehir had come from, information I had obtained by asking for the previous addresses of interviewees. I had also made use of the quantitative research by another PhD student, Meryem Hayir (2009), and used a quote from it that suggested most people living in Başakşehir came from post-gecekondu areas. A voice from the thirty or so people in the hall protested, “Do you mean Muslim people come from the slums?” Another man tried to calm him down, but it was impossible. He made a long speech in anger criticising both my research and secular judgement about the housing project started by the RP municipalities.2

With my sixth-month fieldwork period now all but complete, I saw in this man’s protest the real dynamic creating Başakşehir. Adding a few more questions to my later interviews, the scene I observed was this: The AKP has always been very determined to get rid of the shanty towns in

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2 The whole discussion is in Chapter IV.
places earmarked for urban renewal projects because residents of the gecekondu were ostracised for their religiosity and their poverty. Bašakşehir’s real aim was not only to build a well-ordered, well-planned town, but also to remove religious people from the squalid historical districts and the shanty areas marked by poverty, and to urbanise them. While the poor and the pious had been supporting political Islam in the shanty districts, literally, they had also supported a motion that would take them away from the environment at the centre of marginalisation and place them at another centre where they could not be subject to marginalisation. It seemed, moreover, that political Islam had kept its promise: A retired businessman I interviewed summed up why he supported the political will that had introduced Bašakşehir as a challenge: “I was living in my own house in Esenler. However, I did not seem to be in the city. By coming here I jumped into the upper class.”

The day after the first meeting, I received another invitation to a meeting at a private high school in Bašakşehir. The person who invited me tried to excuse his friend’s behaviour when, at the meeting, he made certain criticisms about my presentation: For instance, the friend had said, construction of Bašakşehir was for everyone and not just for religious people, it was just that the housing market had branded Bašakşehir in this way. He also criticised me for confusing the definitions of Muslim and Islam. According to him, Islam and Muslim is not the same thing, for Muslims cannot transform Islam, so it will always be original. I could well understand his standpoint: I knew that he was trying to save Islam from the “wrong doings” of Muslims just as all the Islamists had done before him since the nineteenth century.

Later, at the same meeting, the participants surprised me by asking how I would solve the problems of Bašakşehir; what would I suggest doing to make people more neighbourly toward each other, public spaces more attractive, and children more aware of the poor, and so on. I told them that I was not a consultant and could not help them develop any solutions to these problems.

Just before I left Bašakşehir, the magazine I worked for closed down because my boss wanted to invest in another business. I could not therefore complete some of the news stories that I had planned to prepare for the magazine. One of them related to the street names of Bašakşehir. I had gone to the municipality offices to find a decent map of the area that included all the streets and public spaces, and had wanted to find out more about the sources for the street names. I had talked to the public relations officer at the municipality offices about this topic several times. Later, I saw that she had researched and published an article about street etymology in the municipality’s
magazine, Başakşehir Bulletin. I then found that she had produced a long report on the Sahintepe gecekondu neighbourhood, an issue I had covered previously in an article which had been published by the local magazine I worked for. A couple of construction companies later called to ask me how to go about advertising their gated communities in Başakşehir, and both companies told me that they had listened to my presentation at the NGO Platform. After reading my small essay on Başakşehir, published in Express Magazine, a young woman called me to ask for my help in persuading one of her friends not to buy a luxury flat in a new area of the Başakşehir housing project. Thus, even before the writing was complete, this research had unintentionally intervened in the future of Başakşehir.

I.7. The methodology of negotiation

The questions I asked during the six months I spent in the field in Başakşehir were constantly evolving. At first, I wondered why religious families deserted the old historical neighbourhoods and the shanty districts, which they had constructed with their own hands together with their neighbours, to move instead to this overly secure town so far from the city and cut off. My curiosity became more intense once I had experienced how hard, in a practical sense, it was to live in Oyakkent. However, my fieldwork took me in directions I had not anticipated; for example, I might decide to ask a certain question but then come across much more interesting data that had not initially occurred to me, thus diverting my curiosity in other directions.

I had always looked to the point when I would merge the two separate methodological processes used in this research. The methodology utilised to produce the data and the fieldwork were to be brought together in the narrative, with priority given to the fieldwork thinking how I could articulate it within its context. My position as “the lucky reporter” who could devote time to this story while carrying out the fieldwork, provided me the luxury of following my whims and, in addition, the opportunity to examine my questions within the field. While writing, however, I realised that I faced yet another obstacle, one that required questioning the concept-vocabulary that belongs to the social sciences. It dawned on me then that I was adding a new layer to the negotiations that had begun the moment I began my research and that even as the author I was in the midst of ongoing negotiations between the fieldwork and myself.

Methodologically, during fieldwork I was observing, gathering archive material, interviewing people, and holding casual conversations and discussions. The experience I had gained during my
career as a journalist was useful, but to be frank, I employed any technique necessary in order to gather information that would help me understand Bağcılar in context. I carried out ethnographic research: Observed daily life, talked to people, took pictures, and experienced the features and deficiencies of the gated community area of the district. While one could view the Quran recitation meetings as participant observation, my identity as a researcher may have skewed the validity of the observations. On the other hand, these meetings did provide insight into the non-communicative atmosphere of the huge gated community. I also carried out in-depth interviews with other residents of Oyakkent but, by being able to share my own experiences and criticisms about Bağcılar with interviewees, I was both a researcher and a fellow resident sharing similar experiences. These interviews were not therefore one-sided or simple question-and-answer-type interviews, but discussions on Bağcılar, during which interviewees told me many things about their experiences that they otherwise may not have done had I not also lived there: Sometimes they defended it and other times criticised it. Meanwhile, I did archival research in newspapers and municipal bulletins, following the discussions that related to the foundation of Bağcılar. Furthermore, I followed Bağcılar on social media networks and became familiar with the topics under discussion.

I can argue that my methodological position at municipal meetings was one of critical participation. I held a position that was far from objective, however, as I was able to compare the religious attitudes of Bağcılar with those I had experienced within my family and the activist environment of the 1990s. I made an intentionally provocative presentation at the two meetings I attended in order to understand how residents viewed Bağcılar; I wanted to hear whether, from the viewpoint of a lifestyle still under construction, their experiences met with their expectations.

It was only later that I learned of the author Magnani, and realised that he had used a technique similar to the one I had employed experimentally in Bağcılar: “...from close up and within: it’s being capable of grasping the behavioural patterns, not of atomised individuals, but of the multiple, varied and heterogeneous sets of social actors, whose daily lives flow along the landscape of the city and depend on its equipment” (Magnani, 2005).

My research did not develop “from ... within,” that is, behind closed doors, however, because all of the actors shared both their experiences of the living space and the information each of them had confided in me, and this is what made my research one of negotiation. The actors and their observations were not only visible to me, the researcher, but also to each other in the context of research, at meetings, and in interviews published in a local Bağcılar magazine. Everyone was
aware of the answers given to the questions I had asked as part of the research, and it was obvious that everyone was trying to determine what I would eventually write. I interacted with residents, representatives of NGOs, local branches of religious communities, and executives and/or officers of the municipality. Although they knew each other’s position in the context of Bağışehir, they were curious about how they would appear together in another context, outside of, but still in relation to their living space. Some of the interviewees still keep in touch to see if I have finished writing and to ask when the findings of my research are due for publication. They inform me about new developments in the district, and are still keen to talk about Bağışehir, in the hope that they can contribute to the future of the community. Thus, this research is still in process as open media. Paradoxically, the research will lose its negotiation base when I finally submit it as my PhD thesis. I hope, however, that it will help create new questions about Bağışehir.

I.8. Objectivity in negotiation

Throughout my research, I tried to employ different “objectivation” tactics of cultural anthropology believing it is necessary to grasp the reality of the fieldwork. For example, after my failed participant-observation practice at the Qur’an recitation meetings, Bourdieu’s “participant objectivation” strategy appeared salient; on one hand, as a challenge and, on the other, in an ethical context as a legitimising ground for my own position as a researcher (Bourdieu 2003: 281–94). By making transparent my own position the women at the Quran meeting felt I was spying on them, which was an uncomfortable position to be in as a researcher, compelling one to tell one’s own tale in order to equalise one’s position as a researcher. The initial reaction of one woman at the meeting had been to question my objectivity as a “social scientist”: “Then, how can you be an objective researcher … as a former Islamist?” I realised there were two main traps: You cannot be objective because you were an Islamist; and you cannot be objective because you are no longer an Islamist. If it comes to it, at this point in the exchange I could have pointed out: Who do you think can be objective about religiosity? It was advantageous that I shared my interviewees’ cultural language; I was familiar with the politics of religiosity while also having distance from it now that I was a “former Islamist,” which at least in some way may have made my position “more friendly.” Hearing about my personal transformation encouraged the women to talk about their own experience of religiosity and what had brought them to Bağışehir, thus, the advantage of “participant objectivation” is that it helps to build a common language between the researcher, interviewee, and the context under observation. On the other hand, the researcher has always to be ready to discuss
his/her own position in any uneasy situation, because in this way, the existence of the researcher in any environment is perceived as if it were a stick inserted into a hole full of an unknown liquid. In this case, the researcher cannot act as if s/he is an ordinary part of the environment or a perfect stranger; s/he is there to disturb the environment by asking questions.

However, it seems unlikely that “participant objectivation” would serve its purpose in every situation; for example if the interviewee has no interest in the researcher’s story or why s/he is carrying out the research, then the method will not work. In addition, when researching a topical and current political state of affairs in an urban, educated, middle-class area like Bağcılar, the expectation of “objectivity” and its impossibility is emphasised so frequently that the give and take cannot go any further than a mutual statement of position. This is why I prefer the term negotiation rather than give and take, because by making pellucid the negotiation in question one creates the opportunity to meaningfully assess some impasses caused by person-to-person interaction and, moreover, to question the relative advantageous position of the researcher against the fragility of the field. The narrative I am talking about does not signify relativity; in other words, in addition to the narrator not having to say, “This is how I see it,” or “In my opinion this is how it is,” with this approach, on the contrary, the researcher must stay as far away as possible from this position. In practical terms this approach means that, the narrative must detail every finding obtained by this research, accompanied by the process of accessing it. It determines what, why, who, how I asked, the answer, the reason, and how I obtained it. Consequently, I hope, that considering the research process as a negotiation environment and making it pellucid—in other words, narrating the obtained data without detaching it from its context—would rather than relativize that data, create the opportunity to assess the phenomenon indicated by it, together with the dynamics that shaped it.

P.S.: IF YOU WANT TO READ THE REMAINING, JUST SEND ME A MESSAGE...

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