


Chapter 18

The Political Economy of Urban Transformation: *Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits* – An Analysis of the Documentary

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ABSTRACT

Cities, in the process of modernization, make historical progress parallel to the dynamics of capitalist development. Capitalism uses urban structures to overcome crises and increase the fluidity of capital. Changes in the labor force, agricultural policies, migration, urbanization or being otherized in the city, new consumption habits give clues of how capitalism uses the urban space to reproduce itself. In this article, which economic and sociological reasons emerged in the recent history of urban transformation, is examined. It is also the subject of the documentary how the transformation that has occurred since the 2000s has been shaped in line with the needs of capital in the transition to the new capitalist model. In this context, the questions raised in the documentary and the relationship between political economy and urban transformation were tried to be understood.

INTRODUCTION

The changing regimes of capital accumulation and the historical development of modern cities demonstrate important similarities. Capitalism uses spatial structures to overcome its crises and increase the fluidity of capital. The changes in the labor force, migration, urbanization, gentrification, new consumption habits provide conceptual clues as to how capitalism uses urban space to reproduce itself. The attempt to solve the geopolitically unequal development of capitalism and excessive accumulation through various spatial searches determines the forms of urban transformation. It is important to comprehend how the spatial transformation in a city like Istanbul, which is a center candidate for the global capitalist

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consumption, is affected by the processes of capital accumulation. In countries like Turkey where the economic growth rate mostly depends upon the productivity of the construction sector, urban transformation directly impacts the economic infrastructure. As the construction investments in cities are increasing; urban centers and certain plots of land with high rent value are being cleansed from the poor. The most typical modern organizations of capitalism such as the shopping malls, continue to be built in our modern era where the cities become the central sites of capital accumulation.

While the city center is designed for upper-income groups, new living spaces are being built outside the city for classes that do not prefer to live in the city center. For upper-income groups, it is sometimes unnecessary to go to the city center regarding the facilities offered by the place they live, or they are easier to reach by private means of transportation. The public authority built housing for the lower classes. For the poor who were thrown into the walls of the city, the connection with the center was almost broken, which is what is desired in the new capitalist urban order. These spaces freed from the poor have become the new living spaces for the new middle class as a subject of gentrification in certain respects. All these processes and problems are the subject and research area of the documentary *Ecumopolis: City Without Limits*. The documentary includes interviews with experts and those who experience these processes and problems. The concepts of political economy are visualized with real life experiences and presented to the audience. The flexibility of being a documentary in the narrative has facilitated the study of theoretical and historical issues on the one hand, and on the other hand the interviews with people in these living spaces have revealed the practical methodology of theory.

This article makes the links between capitalism and the formation of urban space by both explicating the processes of urban transformation theoretically and offering a detailed account of how these processes occur in Turkey. The economic and sociological reasons that produce the processes of urban transformation and gentrification will be examined. The subject of the documentary how the transformation that has occurred since the 2000s has been shaped in line with the needs of capital in the transition to the new capitalist model. In this context, the questions raised in the documentary and the relationship between political economy and urban transformation will be understood.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION

When writing the history of urbanization, the point that stands out is generally how the city has a production logic unlike the countryside. From this perspective, the city corresponds to a social organization that incorporates the elements of development and continuity of capitalism such as trade and industry. The capitalist city corresponds to a process rather than a static formation. The continuous transformation of social relations means the transformation of the city, and in this context, the city is not merely a reflection of capitalist social relations, but one of the founding elements of these social relations (Şengül, 2002, p. 1).

The changes in urban space are not limited to physical transformations of the spaces of living. Everything, from the historical memory of the city to the daily life practices changes with the intervention into the place. When this change is applied to a large city, it has a much wider impact than anticipated. While the aim of the transformation is often to modernize the city, to improve certain areas of collapse, or to create new and modern living spaces for certain income groups, a number of economic and social consequences come out of these changes. Production relations, new business areas and consumption habits are also reorganized by participating in this transformation. Considering the growing inequal-

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