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Violence and the City of Istanbul

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Abstract

The city of Istanbul historically witnessed many cases of violence. The nature of the violence changed with times and its aggravation had seasons, while some violence was almost always present in some form or another. Being a cosmopolitan urban center, violence seems to be one of the “additives” in the city’s very essence and nature.

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1. Introduction

*The woman— “Did you see Paris?”
The man— “I lived there. There are tall buildings and pale-
faced people”.*

(from the French movie *the Stranger*
based on Albert Camus’
novel)

The city first made its way to sociology by William J. Thomas’ work about the Polish families. Thomas, in turn, had a strong influence on Robert E. Park, who would later investigate Chicago and other major American cities. Those studies include themes like the social profile of immigrants, relationships of neighbors, forms of social

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control, juvenile delinquency, criminal organizations, homeless people, marginal people, ghettos, prostitution etc. (Meter, 1992: 305-306).

According to Ibn Khaldun's work (*Muqaddama*), sedentarized life in cities augments all sorts of vice, especially sexual and gastric voluptuousness (Ulken, 1953: 567). In fact, well aware of this, the pioneering forefathers of today's America, with their Puritan mentality, were first anxious to prefer and promote the rural life, simply as a reaction to sinful urban centers, as they knew them from Europe.

The city had always been a fascinating place for new-comers. Even those who first regard it with hostile attitudes, soon let themselves be lured by the city's attractions and come to appreciate them. This was true for Emperor Gengis, too: It is true that Gengis destroyed the urban life of Khorassan. But soon he came to understand what a city meant and wanted to learn more about the topic. The Turkish savants, Mahmûd Yalawatch and his son Mas'ûd Yalawatch taught him the significance of cities upon his own request. Gengis later ordered those two savants to help his Mongolian governors in the administration of Boukhara, Samarqand, Kachgar and Khotan (Grousset, 1951: 318-319).

2. Istanbul and Political Violence in History

The magnificent city of Istanbul, once the Dersaadet of the Ottomans, always had a tinting of violence mingled with its politics. Many viziers got beheaded (1) by the hardened executioners, following the orders of the sultans. A still-in-use idiom deriving from those experiences refer to a vizier's two different shirts: One for glorious celebrations and the other for capital punishment! The lacet of the deaf-mutes (2) was a potential danger already tickling the gorge of any newly promoted pasha or vizier (3) of the court.

Fratricide was often resorted to also, due to conflicts within the Ottoman dynasty. The internal struggles for the throne among brothers (it would be more appropriate to say half-brothers) after Bayazid the First was a historical lesson to bear in memory. The intact survival of the state appears to be a rightful moral excuse for indulging in fratricide. Mehmet the Conquerer would later legitimize fratricide (4) in written code to overcome disputes over the throne.

Sometimes the Janissaries revolted asked for heads. On one occasion (in 1622) they directly killed their own sultan, Othman the Second 'thereby nicknamed Othman the Young).

The Janissaries degenerated more and more and finally became a burden, let alone defending the state against external aggression. A reformer, Mahmud the Second later exterminated the Janissary Corps under artillery fire in 1826 and instigated a new army.

In Ottoman times convicted criminals were hung publically, like in many other countries (5). The famous plane tree in Chengelkoy district (now giving shade to a fishermen's coffee-house) is reputed to have served as gallows for many.

3. The Tradition of Bully-boys

The bullies' tradition in Istanbul is also worth mentioning. They emerged towards the later years of the Ottoman era, obviously due to weakness of the state control and the constantly winning over of corruptive ways. Sometimes they took on functions of informal justice providers.



Fig. 1. An Istanbul bully-boy in late Ottoman era. He is whirling the tip of his mighty moustache and shouting out a typical fight-cry on the street. He has a fez on his head. His unauthorized gun is stuck in his waistband, his jacket, with a flower stuck to its collar, just dangles from his left shoulder. The Speech-Balloon says: “He whose corpse is bound to stay without candle-light!” (roughly meaning “my ominous, sinister, non-saintly opponent [can not ever defy me!]”) (illustration by the author — S.C.).

They were the ones who let locks of hair slip out of their fezes and who walked around barefooted. The fez itself was tilted sideways. The jacket was never worn. Instead, it was overthrown on one shoulder. A flower was stuck behind one ear. A dagger was openly displaced stuck into a thick woolen belt. Despite the naked feet, a precious stone ring was another sign of the bully. He was a character peculiar to Istanbul. Yet he was not an Istanbulite. He had his origins elsewhere. The first five squads of the pumpers (the first fire extinguishing unit) were under their monopoly. Black Cezmi of Kadirga area was one such pumper. He was born in 1840. Former he had been a coach rider. His first crime was killing a pasha’s son. After several skirmishes he got caught on Istranca mountains in Thrace and put into the Sinop castle at an age close to twenty-five (Hicyilmaz 1996).

4. Istanbul as a Suitable “Inn” for Outlaws

— “The road from the village to the city is long; but the road from the village to the city is even longer”

An Ottoman saying from a novel
by
The Bosniac author Mehmed
Selimović

Istanbul has always been a cosmopolitan (6) city inhabited by settlers from almost all over the world. The Aksaray district, for instance, takes its name from the mid Anatolian town, from where settlers were brought to populate the Byzantium city with Moslems.

Obviously in a cosmopolitan setting a community feeling can not prevail. The social control and sanctions / pressures get loose, allowing individuals to go their own ways. The competition reaches its peak, everybody trying to excel in his strongest aspects, whatever this aspect happens to be, criminal ways and abilities included.

With the advent of modern times gangsters (7) emerged in Istanbul. Organized crime flourished feeding upon smuggling, drug-dealing, ransom-collecting, gambling, prostitution etc.

Necdet Elmas (originally from Eregli province of Konya) is considered as the first metropolitan type of armed robber, who handled machine guns and drove cars. He committed a bank robbery in 1960. With his booty he took shelter in a house, threatening the family to play it cool. He eventually got caught and served a long sentence. In early 1970s he was accorded a short leave, when he took his sick father to a hospital before returning to prison.

In 1967 Vural, another gangster deserted the prison but he soon got shot in a skirmish with detectives. Newspapers gave wide coverage to the event and mentioned.

5. Juvenile Delinquency: an Escalating Problem

Youth offences constitute a big social problem in western countries. The offenders usually come from slum areas. Along with the urbanization (8) of Turkey, especially Istanbul must cope with this growing problem.

Since 1990's the problem is given special care in the media. Some high school boys are known to carry knives, switch blades, brass knuckles and even guns. They are ready to engage in fights for a trifle. Wooing girls and other rivalry soon end up in fights. Some students collaborate with drug-pushers. Some set up gangs and squeeze ransom money from their peers.

6. Brief Etiology of Political Violence among the Youths

The involvement of masses of young people with politics came to Turkey mainly at the same time with the western world in late-1960s. From then on, political polarization and violence steadily augmented until the coup d'état of 1980.

In mid-1990s political (along with criminal violence) gained a new momentum (9). Feverish political demonstrations broke out. An analysis of the incidents verify that mostly the second generation of squatters seem to lie behind.

For the first generation the arrival in the city represented an upward socio-economical movement as well as a geographical horizontal displacement. Back home their earlier life conditions had been worse. Besides, the city provided them with jobs like concierge duty in apartment buildings, janitor work in institutions, peddler's opportunity, construction workmanship and so forth. Besides, city-dwellers were more accepting and tolerant towards them; their numbers being smaller and there being need for such job-holders (10).

During their arrival times, Istanbul was able to absorb and buffer the new-comers by imposing upon them its city norms. Later on, the new-comers began to submerge the city, which itself began to resemble the "occupiers" more and more. Istanbul-born and Istanbul-bred citizens first resented this and slow by slow came to accept the fact.

This adventure had its parallel on a global scale just after the Second World War as Ansari (1975: 21-23) describes it: "The post-war era saw many new African and Asian states. Before, the traditional cultures of tribal and rural communities provided stability and continuity. The newly-emerging setup altered this quickly. The postwar world inherited an unbalanced economic structure in which wealth was most unevenly distributed. Under present conditions the material demands of individuals —especially of the younger generation— far exceeded the national

potential of almost all Afro-Asian countries. The ever-increasing demands (and lack of acquisition) are nurturing a frustrated youth and [aggravating the generation-gaps]”.

7. Conclusion

The saying “everything has its seasons” seems to be quite true. In 2000s similar happenings associated with violence considerably declined. Nevertheless, political disturbances set aside; as a big, cosmopolitan center Istanbul has always been way ahead of rural regions and other cities in producing and experiencing ordinary sort of criminal violence acts.

Notes

- 1) The beheading at the Ottoman capitol were carried out near the infamous executioners’ fountain just outside the palace, and the employed sword was washed cleaned right there. Executions of *shehsades* (sultan’s sons), the spill of their holy blood being forbidden, was carried out through strangling by silken bowstrings. This practice sometimes included other high-ranking officials, too. s.c.
- 2) The palace executioners were castrated blacks, mostly giant *Nubidians*. They had been deliberately rendered deaf and mute before taking up the profession, for the sake of secrecy. The graveyard of the dead executioners was also separated from all the other cemeteries. s.c.
- 3) Barber (1973: 54-55) vividly describes the one such incident, namely the execution of Ibrahim Pasha, the previously favorite grand vizier of Suleiman the First: “*Ibrahim’s vanity was growing and becoming dangerous. Roxelane’s [Circassian Hurrem, the preferred concubine and later wife of the sultan] convincing talks had their effects on the sultan’s decision. But Suleiman had given his word never to disgrace Ibrahim while he [Suleiman] lived. A legal counselor of the Dīvan [cabinet] said “cause him to be strangled while you are asleep; he that sleeps doth not truly live”. On March fifteen 1536 the two men dined quietly (a common affaire for them until then). When Suleiman was about to retire he suggested that Ibrahim remain for the night in the adjoining room in the Seraglio. [He himself had taken a sleeping remedy to ensure a deep sleep]. The next morning his strangled body was found at the Seraglio gate, but all the evidence pointed to a violent struggle between the Grand Vizier and the deaf-mutes. The walls of the room were splashed with blood that remained there for a century”.*
- 4) Barber (1973: 74-75) also gives an account of the most dramatic example of fratricide in the Seraglio: [*As soon as Mehmet III ascended the throne at the age of twenty-nine, upon the death of Murad III] his dominant mother insisted that he [a weak-minded man] must invoke the related law. The sultan commanded his nineteen brothers to come and kiss his hand. The eldest was only eleven. As they trooped into the Throne Room, Mehmet III told them they had nothing to fear, he wished them no harm, but he felt that they should be immediately circumcised. The surgeons were waiting in adjoining rooms. And so were the deaf-mutes. Each boy was circumcised within a few minutes of his royal audience then taken to the next room and dexterously strangled. The next morning the corpses were laid out in nineteen small coffins. They were all buried with their father (the former sultan Murad III).*
- 5) The idea of providing a lesson and deterring people from crime was prevailed for centuries all over the world. Obviously it did not serve the purpose. In England pickpockets were hung as late as the early nineteenth century and it is known that some pickpockets, ironically, were working among crowds watching those hanging scenes. (Journalist Mine G. Kirikkanat also stressed this point during a television debate in November 2012 within the context of the capital penalty issue. She pointed out that such horrible executions did not help prevent the related crimes but even aggravated it).
- 6) “*Weber’s concept of a city is clearest if we define a word that stands close to it, the term ‘cosmopolitan’. A human settlement could be called cosmopolitan if, in the same place, a variety of styles of life and different sorts of individuals could coexist. Weber transposed this definition to the nature of the city itself*” (Sennett, 1969: 6).
Speaking of “variety”, Yashar Kemal in a novel of his (*The Birds have also Gone*) refers to an interesting corner of Istanbul, Dolapdere: *This is the most stunning section of Istanbul, where the greatest variety and the richness of colors and sounds reign. This place is unique in the world. Labyrinths of streets, shanty brothels and rendezvous-houses and with all those still a virtuous virginal part is to be seen there. All losers, all those in the universe without a bit of luck come and take refuge there. In Dolapdere dignity, baseness, cruelty, friendship, love, hate are all unmeasurable.*
- 7) A movie of late actor and producer *Yılmaz Guney* (title: *The Hopeless*) depicts somewhat romantically a chief gangster, *Firat*, who is temerarious enough to fall in love with a young woman. In one episode he proposes to her: “*You and I and my gun, can’t*

all three of us get along? Do accept!” As he re-iterates his proposal the female response is always “*impossible*”, reaching a higher pitch in each repetition until a last dramatic culmination point. s.ç.

8) “*The annual rate of urbanization in Turkey declined from 7.2 % during 1965-1970, to 6.3 % during 1970-1975 and to 4.3 % during 1975-1980. It increased again to 5.1 % during 1980-1985. The slowing down prior to 1980 can be interpreted as a result of increasing inflation rates and threatening insecurity in the cities caused by political violence*” (Keles 1989: 201).

9) The newspaper headlines in those years (mid-1990s) conveyed horrible events: A shop (*Çetinkaya* textile store) was a target of arsonists. *Alewite* versus *Sunnite* clashes ensued in squatting areas of *Gazi* and *Umraniye* in Istanbul. The corpse of the doyen of business men (*Vehbi Koç*) got stolen from his grave. A divorced man massacred ten people including his ex-wife and his ex-sister-in-law (while fortunately sparing his children). A business man was allegedly tortured in a luxury-hotel-room and was forced to sign false documents, giving up shares on the stock-market. An adolescent committed suicide under the influence of heavy-metal shows in imitation of *Kurt Cobain*, the singer of Group *Nirvana*. Drug dealers kept expanding their student markets. Three militants of a fundamentalist cell bombed the house of some travesties. Travesties’ fights with police and journalists were reported. An allegedly-Satanist girl killed herself. Opposing camps of students in a university dining-saloon attacked one another with glasses and pitchers. Police beat students demonstrating against the Higher Education Board. A news headline said that the police projected its anger onto the students at a time when corruption of politicians was being questioned. Finally the headline of a newspaper said: “*Turkey is getting mad!*”.

10) “*As H. Gans points out, the poor may have a function in the society for the well-to-do layers. They willingly take on physically dirty, dangerous and low-paying jobs*” (Ritzer 1983: 233). Bachmann & Leguennec (1996: 204) quote a former minister of social affairs in France: *Secret immigration itself has its own uses; if we apply international accords strictly, we may lack man-power.*

Endnote: The preliminary version of this article was a hand-written graduate term paper with a high grade from Prof. Dr. Keles at Middle East Technical University in Ankara..

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