

A RESEARCH ON THE URBAN COMMONS AND COMMONING PRACTICES IN İZMİR

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ABSTRACT

Today, all over the world, the struggles of the communities which protest the commodification of the common life sources and urban spaces have become more visible in the urban stage. These struggles of the urban users aim to organize alternative channels to criticize the existing production and re-production processes of the common sources. They bring into together different approaches from various disciplines such as architecture, planning, economy, sociology, etc. This situation provides us a chance to explore new forms of relationalities between different approaches and practices from different disciplines. In this regard, it becomes necessary to evaluate all these applications in a more general framework. Within the scope of this study, these efforts of urban actors to seek and discover what is called "common" are considered within the commoning discussions. It is believed that this kind of approach to such practices can have a more holistic and alternative ways of understanding while examining them. In line with all these concerns, this study conducts a case study that examines the commoning practices that question the production and reproduction process of the common space in İzmir. In this regard, *Kapılar* as an open and free common space has been chosen as a case. This common space and the spatial practices which are performed here are evaluated within the framework of commons/commoning concepts. It is believed that this framework is important for thinking about the relationship between space and politics. With this case study, following critical questions are tried to be questioned, such as; how commoning practices can find a response in concrete physical space, how they operate within the potentials and limits of the city of İzmir and finally what kind of conditions make this particular common space possible. In order to achieve that, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the participants of these practices. The voice record taken in these interviews has been converted into a written transcript. This written transcript has been analysed with the context analysis method. And finally, with the evaluation of the results of this context analysis, the mentioned practices of common space and the

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practical structure of these commoning practices have been tried to be deciphered.

Key words: Urban Commons, Commoning, Spatial Practices, Public Participation, Social Reproduction

1. INTRODUCTION

Capitalist urbanization continuously tends to destroy the common urban spaces. The process that started with the enclosure movements in the 14th and 15th centuries, later continued with the occupation of some common resources such as green areas, water basin, forest, soil, etc. Today, this process has almost reached to a point of destruction of urban space which is the most important common source of the urban life. In today's neoliberal urbanization processes, the urban space is also commodified like everything else. Its use-value is almost unspoken and it is considered only through its exchange value. In such a situation, it seems inevitable for urban users to take action against this opportunist attitude that encompasses his/her entire life. In many parts of the world, people are taking action for reclaiming commons. They take place in different kinds of social movements to regain the control of their lives and to demand a more liveable urban life. In all these struggles, many different alternative channels have been organized. So, it becomes necessary to address all these different struggles under one theme to discover their commonalities and differences. Relating this issue, this study puts the commoning debates at the center of this study and in this way, it aims to evaluate all these alternative channels within this framework.

By means of addressing above issues, this study mainly aims to discuss, what kind of potentials do the struggles on commons have for a more participatory and emancipatory social life. In order to achieve that, firstly the concepts commons and commoning will be defined. After explaining these concepts, social conditions that require commoning and the situations that make these commoning practices possible, will be discussed. And finally, different approaches which have been studied so far in the literature relating to the government of the commons will be tried to be explained. And then, in line with all these concerns, a common space example in İzmir and its reproduction process will be analysed in this context.

2. THE CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The definitions of the common and commoning concepts are sometimes confused. The reason for this confusion may be due to both multi-layered meaning of these concepts and sometimes also misuse of these concepts. This

confusion in their definitions may evoke a false perception in people's minds and it maybe even change their understanding of the practices that are represented by these concepts. Therefore, in this part, the meaning of these concepts and also some other concepts that share the same root such as; commoning, commoners and common space, will be explained. Regarding the concept of commons, Jay Walljasper- American writer, and community consultant- says that "commons are in everywhere, but sometimes it can be hard to see them" (Walljasper & Rowe, 2014, p. 21). Because, these alternative collaborations sometimes may not be discovered with our conventional ways of understanding. Even if they are discovered, sometimes it may not be possible to define them with the existing jargon. Therefore, he emphasized the importance of a need to create a common language to describe these new and alternative collaborations (Walljasper & Rowe, 2014, p.22). In line with this thinking, Walljasper and David Bollier -American activist, writer, and policy strategist- have prepared a kind of glossary for the most used concepts in commoning discussions. And they gave a place to this glossary in their book *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons*. In this study, both the definitions in this dictionary and also some other definitions made by the leading theorists working in this field, will be briefly mentioned.

The first concept to be defined, is *commons*. Jay Walljasper and Bollier explain the *commons* in their dictionary as follows; "Commons are creations of both nature and society that belong to all of us equally and should be preserved and maintained for future (Walljasper & Bollier, 2014, p. 312). As Walljasper and Bollier emphasize here, commons are the product of both natural and social processes and everyone should have equal access to these commons. Marxist geographer Harvey also describes the commons as follows: "common is not 'a particular kind of thing' but 'an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to be-created social and / or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood" (Harvey, 2012, p.73). Here, what Harvey emphasized for the commons is, it is a set of relations that constantly changed and transformed. So, it is created and recreated by the community each time. Of course, many more different definitions can be added to these two examples. And each definition will flourish the content of the concept. In a sense, this means that the concept is actually reproduced with the new definitions of the new actors. Another concept to be defined in this study, is *commoning*. Commoning basically can be defined as social practices performed by the commoners to reclaim the commons. As it can be understood from this definition, in order to talk about the existence of a commons, firstly it is necessary to mention about commoners and his/her

commoning efforts. Bollier summarizes this situation very clearly with his following statements; "There is no commons without communing" (Bollier, 2011). In here what is mentioned with the commoners is the person who uses the commons and devotes his or her life to reclaim the commons (Walljasper & Bollier, 2014, p. 24). Another important concept for this study is *common space*. Stavros Stavrides- an architect and activist- defines common space as follows; "it is a set of spatial relations produced by commoning practices that create forms of social life, forms of life-in-commons" (Stavrides, 2016, p. 2).

In fact, the main questions of this study are not what is common or what do we call as common. Rather, it is more about how the spaces and resources that we call as common, are produced, shared or managed by the society. In the literature, a study relating with these issues about the management and sharing of the common sources, which almost everyone refers to it, stands out. This study is *The Tragedy of the Commons* of Garrett Hardin, 1968. In his article, he claims that all shared common sources will inevitably disappear and there is not much to do about it (Hardin, 1968, p.1244). In fact, what he emphasized in here is that it is not possible to manage common resources with a common process. Against this pessimistic picture drawn by Hardin, Elinor Ostrom - American political economist - mentions about eight principles for managing the commons (Ostrom, 1990). Some of the principals that stand out between these eight principles of Ostrom' can be listed as follows; involvement of everyone in the decision-making process, establishing a control system that determines the behavior of participants, establishing a gradual/or stepped responsibility network, searching ways to solve the conflicts, etc. (Ostrom, 1990, p.90). According to Ostrom, each principle helps to improve the governing model of the commons. In other words, it is possible to talk about many different ways of managing common resources and, in the same way, common spaces. These different paths create alternative modes of production. The issue of how these alternative modes of production differ from the market is one of the main discussion lines of this study. Within the scope of this study, it is thought that the commons concept will present an important set of tools in order to understand the internal dynamics of the reproduction process of common space by the urban users.

3. METHODOLOGY

Firstly, a literature review has been conducted in this study. This literature review especially focuses on some concepts like commons, commoning and social reproduction. This mentioned commoning practices are considered together within their theoretical framework and in this way, it is aimed to make more

holistic reading for them. In addition to that, a case study has been conducted in this study. For this case study, *Kapılar* as a common space example in İzmir, has been determined. *Kapılar* is also a collective which includes various actors from different disciplines. An interview has been made with several members of this collective. This interview was semi structured and involves ten open ended questions. The voice record that was taken during interview has been converted into a written transcript. Content analysis method has been chosen to analyse the written transcript.

In this content analysis, the answers of the collective members have been interpreted together with the theoretical links. For this study, the way that the collective members choose to express their practices is also valuable as the answers themselves. Because, talking with a common language strengthens the involvement of the actors in this kind of similar practices. This common language is also a final product of the reproduction process of this space. So, it is thought that making an evaluation based on the statements of the collective members can provide lots of important potentials.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study includes a case study in line with the contextual framework that is mentioned above. For this case study, *Kapılar* which is a free and common space in the Basmane district of İzmir has been chosen. Within the scope of this case study, *Kapılar* as a common space, production and reproduction process of this space and the practices that are performed in here, will try to be evaluated within the discussion of "Commons and Commoning" concepts. First of all, it would be more appropriate to mention what *Kapılar* is. *Kapılar* was established in 2016 in the Basmane district of İzmir. It took its name from the region in which it is located. It works as an experience center where its users come together to share their skills and knowledge (Figure1,2). The team members who put forward the idea of creating a kind of sharing or experience center, define this space with their own statements as follows; "Kapılar is a free space open to anyone looking for a welcoming place in the heart of Basmane, İzmir. Kapılar is for socializing, building relationships between various people in Basmane, sharing important and useful information regarding the rights and opportunities of those living in the community, whether they are locals or migrants" (Kapılar, 2016). In addition to this definition, they say that the description of what *Kapılar* is, actually lies in the history of this space. Because, this common space is constantly reproduced and transformed by its users. So, in order to understand this space, it is very important to evaluate it with its production and reproduction processes. Actually, *Kapılar* which we considered here as a common space, is also a

collective. The internal dynamics of this collective should also be taken into consideration while reading this space. But in here, it is not possible to talk about a team where such a few leading names come to the forefront. The team comes together with many different and independent actors and actor groups with similar concerns. They came together in a common ground. Barış, one of the groups' member within the Kapılar team, explains the earlier stages of this common space as follows;



Figure 1. Front facade of Kapılar Common Space From Kapılar Archive, 2020



Figure 2. Backyard of Kapılar Common Space From Kapılar Archive, 2020

"We always want to take place in a kind of solidarity practice. We have organized various activities with different organizations in that district. In that way, we have created a kind of solidarity network. We have started to think about what else we can do. In those times, we also had some ideas about the concept of open space, but we

didn't know so much. And then, we have started to question the ways how this open space could be possible. We were thinking about finding a place that is suitable for this. We even thought of occupying some places. While thinking about such space, our main aim here is to create a kind of space where different people come together and share their experiences and knowledge."

As Barış stated above, everything has started with the effort of the urban actor to create a kind of solidarity practice against some situations in the urban life that they see as problematic. Such an idea for urban life was a driving force for the realization of spatial commonality. For this study, it is important to start from that point before moving to the spatial commoning discussions. In this respect, understanding the motivations that lay behind these commoning practices to create such a common space has gain importance while reading this whole commoning process. Because the main point here is not just about how this space is produced or how it is used. The questioning of such issues; what kind of conditions required that kind of common space, and also what conditions allow us to meet in a common ground or what conditions restrained it, also have an important place for this study. There are many different dynamics that make these common practices possible or lead them to a dead end. Space has an important place in this context both in terms of making this common life possible and also being a result of this common life. It is like a living organism that constantly changes and transforms with different actors that it includes. It has been reproduced to meet the changing needs of this common life. And this process also produces who reproduces it. So, this whole intertwined process must be read together.

Another important concern of this study is the issue of how the idea of creating a kind of commoning practice has come to realize in a concrete physical space. Because it is a complicated thing for such an abstract idea, it can even be called a bit utopian, to find a response in such a concrete space. Ömer and Serkan, explain the first relationship that this idea was established with this space. By the way, Barış and they are from different groups at first. It is important to emphasize it at that point. Because Barış and a few friends were looking for space when Serkan and Ömer found this space. So, their paths crossed in that way. Ömer and Serkan explain that process as follows;

"We were planning to create a semi-social and semi-economic place. We wanted to design a kind of self-transforming space. There were not many spaces around us that we could use. We found this space. I have also a historical relationship with this district. I was working as a leatherworker in that area about 20 years ago. So, I know this district very well. And we can say that our journey in that process has started with this space. Here, we met with Yalçın. This person has an oral/verbal agreement with

the owner of this space. The owner allowed him to use that space in return for taking care of that space. This is a two-storey building. Yalçın was using the ground floor as a depot. The depot eventually has been turned to a dump. It was not used. We asked him why they did not use the ground floor and he said if you clean, you can use it. Of course, our agreement with Yalçın is just verbal. And then we have started to clean this space. When we finished cleaning this space, we have confronted with an empty garden. By the way, we were cleaning this space but we did not have any idea about what we can do with it. Of course, we would not imagine today's use. After cleaning, many people joined us and we have started to design our agenda".

As understood from Ömer and Serkan's statements, the answer to the question of how this whole idea found a response in one space, has a multi-layered explanation. It is so clear that, in this case, space has been a driving component for commoning practices. Maybe, it can be said that the controversial ownership status of this space helps to achieve that. This building is a private property, but the meaning that this space gains today is beyond that. As the team members expressed, the owner of that building has passed away and two heirs did not talk to each other. Because of the reason that it is a registered building, they cannot decide what to do with that space. Since they cannot take care of the building, they gave it to someone named Yalçın and ask him to take care of that building. And Yalçın has started to use this space and also allowed some associations to use it. As it is seen here, it is necessary to mention a different ownership status apart from public and private, even in-between them. That's why it is so valuable in terms of blurring and questioning the boundaries between these two ownership statuses. It is a different kind of ownership established through use rather than a property relation (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017). This is especially very important in today's capitalist system. Regarding this issue, Stavrides states that common spaces should be considered as a set of relations that challenges the very essence of these ownership statuses (Stavrides, 2016, p.276). This situation brings along so much potential with itself. It allows different kinds of encounters between different actors and produces a different kind of relationalities between them. These different new encounters and the new relationalities also constantly transform the meaning of that space. That's why this situation is considered as important when evaluating the reproduction process of this space.

As it is mentioned at first, this space has been constantly changed and transformed by the commoners that participate in this process. In addition to that, the socio-economic dynamics of that region also have effects on that change. With the participation of various users, different new needs and in connection with that, different usages and practices emerge. So, it is possible to say that such a common space has been produced as a result of the necessities in

this region. In this regard, the examination of the socio-economic structure of this district has gained more importance.

"In the past, there were mostly leather ateliers in this district. Before the pace of the tannery has changed, approximately 10000 leather workers were living in here. When the organized industry has opened, the tannery has been closed and the leather workers have moved from here and the population has decreased. But this region allows continuous migration. Our main concern is, even if we can't do anything here, racism inevitably will rise and we should think about how we can prevent this. In 2015, you need to know how this district was. People were living in the streets. Many of them did not have any place to stay. This is one of the reasons why this space is refugee friendly. You cannot do anything in here despite of it. If we were designing such a common space, it had to be like that. Today, of course, this situation has changed. But the reason for this perception comes from those times. This perception has evolved over time and everyone who heard us has begun to come."

As the team members said, immigrants are an important part of the users of this place. But of course, there are also many different users from different social backgrounds involved in the activities of this space. As Wungpatcharapon emphasized in his study, the involvement of so-called other or marginalized actors in such common practices provides them a chance to transform their social relations by regaining the sense of being common (Wungpatcharapon, 2017, p. 42). When the structure of the collective is also examined, it is seen that there are many different actors from different disciplines such as; a city planner, psychologists, leather workers, teachers, a painter, etc. According to their statements, at least 100 people have been involved in this team so far. There is a constant circulation in the team. Everyone is here for different reasons. Nobody has a fixed or specific duty because it works voluntarily. They say that they use the advantages of the absence of any rules. There is a kind of system that doesn't require anyone to devote his or her whole life there. In addition to that, they emphasize the importance of the horizontal organization structure. They adopt an organizational model in which no one has superiority. And Barış explains the position that they put themselves as follows;

"The main purpose of this space is to remove the third agent between the two actors that are in solidarity. Our position in that process is to bring the two sides, who want to act with solidarity, together and create a kind of space where they spend time together and understand each other. We want to create such an environment in which they can come together and share something without looking at each other from above. In brief, we aim to create a more organic environment that makes the common life possible".

Apart from individual actors, there are also many different associations that use this space according to schedule. The associations from many different backgrounds conduct their activities here and this diversity also provides important diversity in the usage of this space. At this point, it is important to answer a question; while governing such a free, open and common space which activities will be welcomed and which of them will not. Of course, if it is called as a free space, it should be free from all kinds of restrictions. But it is also expected that some activities that are thought as inappropriate to the spirit of the commoning practices, should be excluded from the agenda of this common space. The team member expresses what they decided to include in their agendas and what they did not, and how this decision process has been managed, with the following statements;

"This process is not so complicated for us. All kinds of activities are accepted unless someone says this should not be done. Of course, the issue of what kinds of activities are not accepted is so important here. This process doesn't work like we don't want it, so it should not be done. But it has happened a few times. Gülistan had an objection to an activity. But of course, she evaluated it within the framework of her discipline. As I remember, it was a playback theatre workshop. They wanted to do something with the Syrian immigrants. It was something like a psychodrama. And they wanted them to come and tell their migration experiences in here. Gülistan was not the only one opposing it. There were three psychologists at that meeting. We only said that if you plan to do such an activity, you should have an expert with you. In our opinion, when you open these traumas, you should also think about how to close them. This kind of activity should have continuity in the long term and should be planned by experts. We have discussed this issue among ourselves. And we decided that it is not appropriate for us and this kind of approach did not meet with our concerns. Sometimes such kinds of things also happen; one organization came here for some kind of activities, but they wanted to make a video. We did not want this in terms of security. When they say if you don't allow us to record it, we won't come then, we understood that our decision was so right. They were on different frequency and their concerns were different from ours. In such a situation, we can't say ok for these activities. Everything is okay for us, except for such things. Because we are not an authority here. Our position in this practice is not something like that".

As it can be seen from the above examples given by the team members, what is so valuable in here is the creation of such kind of negotiation environment and looking out for common good. As Stavrides emphasizes, commoning practices, in fact, a little bit conflictual and negotiated process and in that process sometimes it can be said that the existence of such a negotiation ground is more important than the act of sharing (Stavrides, 2016, p. 2). In order to express the

diversity of the usage of this space, the activities performed so far can be listed as follows; People's Kitchen/*Ahali Mutfağı*, (Figure 3), children game workshop, migration stories festival, immigrant rights workshop, movie screening, women's meeting, upcycling: dismantling and recreating workshop, English lessons for adults, Turkish lessons, instrument workshop (Figure 4), Swap Market (Figure 5), Drew Colby, etc. These are only a few of activities performed in here. Of course, it is difficult for one space to be able to answer the different needs of each of these different uses. That's why, for all these different uses, it is reproduced. This reproduction process of this space is also a kind of commoning practice. It is a process in which everyone involves an act of sharing in line with their competencies. The existing condition of "Kapılar" today, is the result of the collective effort of many people.



**Figure 3. A Photo of the Peoples Kitchen/ *Ahali Mutfağı* in *Kapılar*
From *Kapılar* Archive, 2020**



**Figure 4. A Photo from the Instrument Workshop in *Kapılar* From
Kapılar Archive, 2020**



Figure 5. A photo from the Swap Market Activity in Kapılar From Kapılar Archive, 2020

"The cleaning and construction process of this space took six months. In a meeting, someone said that we need a kitchen. Then someone took the measurements, made the kitchen shelves done and brought it to here. And suddenly that space became a kitchen. For example, there was a toilet problem. I worked on that very long time. We have changed the whole infrastructural system. In addition to that, someone brought brick and sand for construction works. Hasan made all plaster works. Barış and Hasan also painted the walls. We can give many more examples like these. In every corner of this space, everyone has so much effort. And they all involve in all these decision-making processes."

It is understood that it is an ongoing process. For each new usage, the new commoners of this space will transform this space and add it to new meanings. And of course, this meaning will be read differently by everyone. Kapılar is now enclosed due to the problems between several actors in this process. This is also actually a part of the reproduction process of this space. The meaning that the space gains now also brings into question a lot of things about commons. Trying to understand the problems that it points out, is so valuable for this study. At such a point, the question of how these practices that started here will transform into another physical space is so interesting. Or the issue of what kind of relationship that the new space of the Kapılar will establish with the current space needs should be examined.

5. EVALUATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

All the narratives of the participants have been transcribed word by word. The written transcript obtained from the interview has been re-read and analysed to determine which keywords has been mostly repeated. The prepared table below,

shows the most frequently repeated keywords and how often they are repeated (Table 1). While preparing this table, the mostly repeated keywords, the keywords with the same meaning or the words with similar associations have been evaluated together.

While evaluating this whole interview, the prominent keywords will be considered as base points. The reason for making such an analysis is that nothing is to be missed while interpreting this written transcript. This analysis will also help to test whether the interpretation made in here reflects the same intensity with the answers of the collective members. While evaluating this table, it can be said that some of these keywords stand out more than the others. These keywords are; everyone, solidarity, collective, aid, space, and enclosure. The fact that why these keywords are repeated so much is that the team wants these themes to be more prominent while expressing themselves and their goals. For each keyword the reasons why the group members want to emphasize this word is tried to be interpreted as follows; If we start with everyone, the emphasis of this keyword here points out the effort of creating a more inclusive process that everyone can be involved in. They want to manage this space with an approach of where nobody is marginalized, equally involved in all kinds of the decision-making process.

Table1. Frequently repeated keywords by interviewees

Keywords	Frequency
everyone	14
solidarity	17
aid	21
collective	11
sharing	6
experience	14
hierarchy	6
enclosure	15
space	27
common	6
ownership	5
self-transformation / transformation	8
encounter	6
participation	9

Another important concept is *solidarity*. In the interview, the team members especially emphasized that it is very important for them to perceive the difference between *solidarity* and *aids*. They said it is so crucial for understanding the main motivation that lay behind all the commoning practices in here. In order to express their practices, they use solidarity concept rather than aid. Because they believe that *aid* includes a kind of patronizing attitude between both sides. They regard solidarity as a sharing experience under more equal conditions. That's why they aim to create a strong solidarity network between all actors. So, it is not surprising that these two concepts are repeated too much. Another commonly used concept is *collective*. Act of producing something together is the most important component of providing solidarity. This situation can be expressed with the manifestation of the collectives. The main goal of the collective is to create an environment in which the participants can be in contact with each other and share their experiences by making production together.

The other two concepts that stand out in here are *experience* and *sharing*. What Kapılar basically tries to realize experience sharing. Another important keyword for Kapılar is *space*. There is a strong connection between the space and the practices of the collective. Here, space has been a driving component for all these commoning practices. That's why they express themselves and their practices over the production process of this space. So, the last keyword is the enclosure. The reason why so much emphasis they put on this keyword is that Kapılar is closed now by some other stakeholders in this process. So, they want to use this situation as an opportunity for revival. That's why they emphasized this keyword frequently.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study examines the social reproduction processes of the space, through the *Kapılar* common space and commoning practices performed in that space. While examining that, this common space has been considered not as a concrete material object, rather it has been considered as a social process and a set of relations that are created in this process. Therefore, in order to understand the production process of this common space, the conditions that create this commonality have been examined first. In this regard, this study firstly questions why individuals take part in such a spatial commoning practice. For the *Kapılar* case, it can be said that they participate in such a commoning practice to create alternative solutions for some problems that they observed in social life. In here, the idea of considering common goods of the society instead of just thinking their own individual problems comes to the forefront. This situation reinforces the idea of being a community and acting together. As the group members

mentioned, everything actually starts with finding the space. As they expressed, the controversial ownership status of the space helped them to create such a commonality. In this case, a different kind of ownership status has been experienced rather than private and public. This common space provides a common ground for various actors with similar common concerns to come together. This situation creates new encounters and new relationalities between them. Of course, the scale of production grows with each new encounter, and in this case, the question of how to organize this whole process becomes prominent. Regarding this issue, team members said that they conduct a kind of horizontal organization model that mostly comes from bottom-up. But the absence of such a decision-making authority may bring some questions in mind how this common space should be governed or managed. As the team members state that, in such a situation the existence of a negotiation environment gains importance. Although it is a free and open space, they said that they try to create an environment that will not interrupt the commonality. For them, it is very important for all stakeholders to be involved in every decision-making process related to that space, in every stage. In this process, although participants can be in disagreement, they eventually reach a compromise. And sometimes the existence of this negotiation atmosphere can be more valuable than sharing.

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