The Invisible City of Alternative Theatre: Tactics, Collective Actions and Micro-Publics in Istanbul’s Cultural Economy

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to gain a better understanding of the ways in which cultural networks shape the urban spaces in which they operate, how this in turn is regulated by local government regimes, and the extent to which these cultural networks contribute to the city as a site of democracy. Focusing on the case of alternative theatre in Istanbul, Turkey, we show that these theatre spaces in the era of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) are characterised by an ‘alternative’ position to a neoliberal project. This neoliberal project that is organized around the cultural economy imaginary of the AKP government, and which tends to make invisible these theatre spaces in the city. It is this very invisibility, we argue, that allows these alternative theatre networks to develop particular tactics, collective actions and micro-publics in the city, and to shape and democratise urban space.

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Introduction

In general terms, the contribution of culture in maintaining the symbolic legitimacy of the political order is a significant issue for scholarly research (Ahearne, 2009). In more concrete terms, it can lead us to an investigation not only of government-initiated cultural policy and planning, but also an assessment of a much more diverse set of agents and agencies (Bennett, 2009) that together produce the spaces of culture in which they operate. In urban contexts, with a high density of interacting actors, this leads to political questions concerning the role of these actors in the ordering of these urban spaces, and the ways in which their actions contribute to the control or even censorship of particular cultural expressions and the exclusion, banning, suppression, or simple ignoring of cultural actors (Evans, 2001: 8).

Considering this context, in this paper we present an empirical analysis of alternative theatres in Istanbul, Turkey. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which these cultural networks shape the urban spaces in which they operate, how this in turn is regulated by local government regimes, and the extent to which these cultural networks contribute to the city as a site of democracy. Turkey is an interesting case in this respect. The post-2002 political dominance in Turkish politics of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) has had particular consequences for cultural politics on the urban level. Istanbul is seen by the AKP both as a neoliberal growth machine and as perhaps the prime site for the implementation of its conservative socio-cultural beliefs. This produces various tensions between government actors and cultural actors that demand further investigation. These tensions emerge particularly vividly in the domain of alternative theatre, since these spaces are characterized by an ‘alternative’ position to a neoliberal project that is organized around the cultural economy imaginary of the AKP government, and which tends to make invisible these theatre spaces in the city. It is this very invisibility, we argue, that allows these alternative theatre networks to shape and democratize urban space through the following: (i) their relations with the local governments; (ii) their collective movement which bypasses traditional forms of organisation (Göle, 2013; Firat and Bakçay, 2012) and emphasises the role of urban cooperation instead of competition (Sennett, 2013); and (iii) the creation of a micro-public (Valentine, 2008; Fine, 2010).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The following section offers a succinct discussion of Istanbul’s cultural landscape, to set the scene and to better understand the position of theatre within the wider cultural economy. This is followed by a section in which we briefly sketch the main political effects of the rise of the AKP, focusing on the state regulation of cultural expression through shifts in cultural governance, and on the ways in which state-driven urban transformation projects shape cultural practices on the urban neighbourhood level. We then briefly introduce our methodology before discussing in more detail the case of alternative theatre in Istanbul, focusing on two key dimensions: (a) the relations between alternative theatres and local governments and (b) the organization of alternative theatre spaces and networks. Finally, in the conclusion we summarize the key points in our article and critically reflect on the contribution of alternative theatre to the city as a site of democracy.

Figure 1: Kumbaraci 50, located in one of the backstreets of Istiklal Avenue (Kumbaraci Hill): © Sanul & van Heur
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The cultural economy of Istanbul

Istanbul is at the heart of Turkey’s cultural economy regarding its number of enterprises, employment and consumer expenditures. According to national statistics, 40% of all cultural industries in Turkey are based in Istanbul. Similarly, 20% of household expenditure on cultural and entertainment services take place in Istanbul and its share in the entire country with regard to the number of theatres, cinemas, performances and their visitors is almost 30% (Aksoy and Enlil, 2011).

In terms of theatre infrastructure, there are two major types of public institution, namely Istanbul State Theatres (IST) and Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Theatres. IST occupies a key position in the field of theatre with a 20 million Turkish Lira (approx. 6 million Euro) yearly budget, more than 250 staff members and 13 theatres in various districts of Istanbul. Other important actors are the private theatres that are autonomous companies with a seating capacity of 150 people or more (Langerova and Seyben, 2013). The most recent statistics point to a total of 189 theatres in Istanbul (Turkstat, 2013), with an increase of 18% between 2010 and 2013. While several theatre spaces have closed as a result of the urban renewal process of Istanbul, it is possible to trace the causes of an increase in spaces to the newly opened cultural centres by AKP municipalities and/or to the number of private theatres.

In the current AKP era, with its marriage between neoliberal economic policies and conservative political and socio-cultural principles, Istanbul is seen both as a growth machine and as a terrain for socio-political transformation (Aksoy, 2014; Eraydın and Kök, 2014). Considering governance and the organization of the state, this has led to a process of policy devolution to local government very much in line with similar experiments by neoliberal forms of governance in other countries (Gualini, 2006; Jonas and Pincetl, 2006). At the same time, research shows that there is a coherent multiscalar regime in place with the central government and Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) – both governed by the AKP – working closely together with AKP-governed district municipalities in Istanbul to promote the image of the city through mega-events and to invest in cultural infrastructure (Ince, 2010; Aksoy and Robins, 2011).

With the cultural economy, the main trend has
been to look towards the private sector for the funding (and cultural management) of cultural organizations through the incentive of generous tax breaks (Aksoy and Enlil, 2011). This has led to significant private sector as well as NGO involvement in funding the contemporary arts; the arts are not considered for structural funding by central or local governments in Turkey. The opening of the new Istanbul Modern art museum (inaugurated in 2004) was funded by the Eczacıbaşı Family; SALT, a research-based contemporary art institution, is funded by Garanti Bank; and ARTER, a contemporary art gallery, is funded by Koç Holding, to name some of the more important venues that have created a lively contemporary art scene in Istanbul in the last fifteen years. Despite this prosperous environment for the contemporary arts, the position of independent, small-scale actors within the cultural economy is much more difficult: they are not an object of the policies and funding schemes of local governments, nor do they manage to gain long-term support from private funders. Private funders seem to find it more attractive to be associated with prestigious and highly visible contemporary arts organizations, whereas AKP municipalities have introduced the notion of ‘neo-Ottomanism’ and now prioritize the traditional arts (as a source for funding and as a legitimate part of cultural tourism and the cultural industries).

**Shifts in cultural governance: state regulation and urban neighbourhoods**

In the Turkish context, theatre has for a long time been attributed with the task of spreading Westernization in the context of Turkish patriotism, with the aim of transforming an Eastern, Ottoman, traditional and patriarchal society, into a modern, secular and ‘civilised’ one (And, 1992; Buttanri, 2010). In the era of one-party rule, 1923-1950, during which the foundations of the newly founded Turkish state and its project of Westernization was strengthened, many plays were banned as they praised the old Ottoman Empire (Ünlü, 1995). Censorship continued during the multi-party era that commenced in the 1950s, but the 1960 Constitution was the first and only Turkish constitution that promoted freedom of expression. Enabled by this
newfound freedom and in particular in the 1970s, many private theatres flourished by introducing epic theatre to Turkish audiences. The 1980 Military Coup, however, changed all this, putting several censorship mechanisms in place. Left-wing thought in particular was excluded from publicly-funded theatres, and self-censorship became an identifiable norm in private theatres. At the same time, the actors that were fired from the State theatres, laid the foundations for the rise of the alternative theatres of the 1990s (Başar, 2014).

Following the first election success of the AKP in 2002, the AKP has emphasized a more conservative social agenda. This has led to various interventions in individual freedoms and lifestyles, with Bırkye (2009) even arguing that “criticism of the AKP government, its record and world view as well as ethically questioned themes or even words are all subject to censorship” (p. 270). In the context of culture and theatre, however, many interventions are less explicit than censorship and mainly revolve around changing government regulations. Thus, one of the first initiatives of the AKP government was to change the legal status of municipal theatres in order to be able to include state bureaucrats in the administrative boards of these theatres. Also, attempts were undertaken to privatize state theatres, which is understood by Aksoy and Seyben (2015) as a shift from a laissez-faire position and a shift against a secular cultural industry. As former Prime Minister Erdoğan declared:

"There is now a debate about theatre. In fact, the issue is not about theatre. It is about a different matter altogether – it is about an elite that has created a sequestered realm of influence for itself, from which it then looks down on people... But, I am sorry to say, the period of haughtily looking down on people and on the people’s government is over...But no longer through the old approach...Be private, be independent and be free. The state is withdrawing from the theatre scene. Please, the floor is yours." (Erdoğan, 2012; translated by Aksoy and Seyben, 2015).

Finally, the regulation concerning the ‘public support for private theatres’ has changed, through the inclusion of a ‘public morals’ criterion by Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MoCT). The regulation provides for the withdrawal of funds in case a theatre performance is not in line with ‘public morals’ orientation, or insults certain segments of Turkish society. Siyah Bant, a research platform investigating censorship in the arts, argues in a report that “vague conceptions of societal sensitivities along with that of ‘public morals’ have been elevated above the state’s mandate and legally stipulated duty of supporting and protecting the arts as well as the artist” (2013: 1).

On the urban level, the aim to transform Istanbul into a ‘global city’ has involved a top-down governmental approach that is defined by many as “an authoritarian and undemocratic way of policy making,” which also gives no room for participation of civil society (Elicin, 2014) and which has resulted in the destruction of local cultures with inhabitants being evicted from their neighbourhoods as part of state-led urban regeneration projects (Dinçer, 2011). Within Istanbul, the Beyoğlu district plays a key role in this urban transformation, both for revealing the impact of the AKP government’s neoliberal urban policies (combined with the dream of neo-Ottomanism) and for observing the tensions between civil society, including cultural actors, and the state. ‘Cosmopolitan Beyoğlu’ was the location of the first theatres, cinemas and concert halls opened by European as well as non-Muslim citizens (Greek, Armenian, Jews) of the Ottoman Empire (Aksoy and Robins, 2011). Following the founding of the Republic and the related spread of nationalist ideas, Beyoğlu slowly became more monocultural, but it has kept its importance through its symbolic places – Taksim Square, Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM) as well as Gezi Park (which replaced the Ottoman Artillery Barracks) – in which a Westernized, secular lifestyle could reveal itself. It is therefore easy to understand why the attempt to build a mosque in Taksim, an area known as and representing the ‘modern’ side of Istanbul, has become such a major battlefield. It is understood as a prime expression of the ‘re-conquerisation’ of the city following the success of the Islamist Welfare Party in the 1994 municipal elections (Bora, 1999; Bartu, 1999).

Many of the AKP government’s neoliberal urban policies are also focused on Beyoğlu; the area has undergone various gentrification projects over the last decade. Among them, İstiklal Avenue became a showcase with a rapid increase in multinational firms and national brands (Adanali, 2011). Slowly transforming into a shopping street, İstiklal Street started to lose its veteran movie theatres such as
Alkazar, Emek, Rüya, as well as other unique spaces of everyday cultural life and which are still very much present in the individual and collective memories of their local users. The closure of Emek Movie led to the gathering of many activists, for the first time in 2011, in order to emphasize the cultural and historical value of this place and to demand its collective ownership instead of its privatization (Fırat, 2011: 109). Similarly, the Gezi Uprising in 2013 primarily started as a reaction against the destruction of Gezi Park and its replacement by an artificial reconstruction of the Ottoman-era artillery barracks intended to function as a shopping mall. Initiated by a group of environmental activists in the form of a ‘modest Occupy style’ initiative, Gezi Movement reunited for a very limited period of time parts of society that usually remain divided, ranging from secular to Muslim, Alevi and Kurdish citizens. By denying traditional organisational structures and focusing on horizontal relations of cooperation, the Gezi Uprising rejected the politics of polarisation by demonstrating that Turkey is a lively democracy that defends democratic freedoms and rights for all its citizens (Göle, 2013).

Researching alternative theatre: methodological reflections

Alternative theatre in Istanbul needs to be placed within this wider environment of the restructuring of Istanbul along neoliberal-conservative lines and the various contestations over the direction of this urban transformation. The first author of this article conducted the fieldwork and empirical research underlying the analysis presented here. Following a few years (2010-2013) of observation and participation in the alternative theatre scene as ‘cultural consumer’, alternative theatre became a research object in the context of her PhD thesis. On the basis of this preliminary knowledge, a decision was made to specifically focus on the Alternative Theatre Spaces Joint Initiative, where the similar spatial and locational aspects of the constituents play a specific role in shaping the network relations and the tensions with the Municipality.

Using a case study approach involving participant observation, in-depth interviews and content analysis, the first author focused specifically on the organizational dynamics of alternative theatre spaces and the ways in which these spaces are regulated by local government regimes. A first step was to take fieldwork notes following the observation of and informal talks with the audience of alternative theatres. In parallel, extensive content analysis of various written sources – ranging from printed and online newspapers, brochures, Facebook and Twitter posts – was conducted. This step helped to develop interview questions to conduct expert interviews (with an average length of two hours) with twenty people in the field of alternative theatre and mainly being members of the Joint Initiative. Most of the interviewees were between 25 and 45 years old and by and large were either recent graduates of the public or private university conservatories or people who had started their theatre groups during their university education. The interviews mostly took place in the theatre spaces in order to create a familiar environment for the interviewees and to allow the first author to simultaneously observe their daily working environment and relations with other team members.

The interview questions were structured around a number of specific topics. The first part of the interview was dedicated to getting to know the interviewee, their education, the places they visited during their university years, their attachment to symbolic cultural places in Istanbul (Emek Movie, Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM), İstiklal Street). This was followed by a part revolving around their theatre space, the process of establishing this space, the relations with the surrounding locality and its inhabitants, relations to the theatre audience, and the contacts with public authorities, in particular local governments and the Ministry of Culture. In the final part of the interview, discussion moved to their perception of the Alternative Theatre Spaces Joint Initiative and the ways in which this network functions. Although the main geographical focus is the Beyoğlu district, interviews also took place in the Kadıköy district with the founders of Kadıköy Theatre Platform, founded by the old and rooted theatres of Kadıköy district and one member of the Joint Initiative based in Kadıköy in order to allow for a preliminary comparative perspective that could help to identify the specificity of the Beyoğlu district.

Alternative Theatres in Istanbul

Alternative theatres are defined as independent groups who use experimental approaches for dramaturgy, playwriting and staging strategies. By
transforming nonconventional theatre spaces such as apartments, pool halls, textile ateliers or garages, they form 'blackbox' stages (simple performance spaces with a large square room with black walls and a flat floor) that are moveable, with unnumbered seats and without changing decor.

What makes the plays of the alternative theatres specific is their articulation of the stories of a wider range of urban population than are usually visible in the public theatres or in the commercial private theatres, including the stories of Kurds, LGBT, and Muslim women with headscarves (Bašar, 2014: 180). The pioneers of the alternative theatres are from a generation of the 1980s who had suffered from the oppression during the Military Coup period and established their independent theatre groups in the 1990s, settling in the Beyoğlu district in the 2000s. Understood as the cultural centre, Beyoğlu is part of the so-called ‘cultural triangle’ of Istanbul, which is a symbolic region consisting of six districts (Fatih, Beyoğlu, Şişli, Beşiktaş, Üsküdar and Kadıköy); it is a point of concentration for the city’s cultural infrastructure (Aksoy and Enil, 2011). Within this triangle, Beyoğlu has a relative specialisation in contemporary arts. Whereas many of the contemporary cultural centres and art galleries of the private sector are located on İstiklal Avenue, alternative theatre spaces are mostly located on the backstreets of İstiklal Avenue, in the Galata, Tünel and Karaköy neighbourhoods, in the Şişli district which is in close proximity to Beyoğlu, or in the Kadıköy district which has been the location for many older and locally rooted theatres for a longer time (MAP A).

Regulating theatre

Formal and informal state regulation has a number of effects on alternative theatre in Istanbul. In this section, we discuss three kinds of regulation.

Licensing

In the case of licensing, the status of alternative theatres constitutes a difficulty for municipalities. The theatre license has been designed for conventional theatre stages with more than 150 seats and definite construction features, but alternative theatres that convert nonconventional spaces into theatres spaces usually do not fulfil the licensing requirements. As a result, many alternative theatres in Istanbul face a problem of gaining a license and so are, in effect, condoned by most local governments.

Although this problem applies to all municipal districts and is largely the result of a lack of cultural policy and an administration that translates these policies in the necessary regulation, our research shows that this problem is tackled in the districts of Kadıköy and Şişli. Whereas in Şişli, the personal interest of the Mayor plays a role in supporting alternative theatres (Langerova and Seyben, 2013), in Kadıköy a platform founded by the old and locally more embedded private theatres, namely Kadıköy Theatres Platform, undertakes the responsibility of contact with the Municipality by providing an intermediary role through which alternative theatres can convey their needs and problems to the Municipality.

In Beyoğlu, in contrast, the Alternative Theatres Joint Initiative currently does not produce such a collective form of action to communicate with Beyoğlu Municipality. As Langerova and Seyben (2013) note: “they don’t get any fiscal or other contribution from the Beyoğlu Municipality” (p.6). This is perhaps surprising considering that the very foundational aim of the Joint Initiative has been to establish contact with the Municipality for licensing requirements (needed for opening and running a theatre) and public funding through ‘in kind’ aids, tax reductions or promotional needs (allowance to put up a signboard or orientation sign). However, an interviewee who was responsible for the communication with the Municipality in the early days of the Initiative expresses that none of the meetings with the Municipality led to any results.

Voice

Relate to the problem of licensing, a second mode of state regulation revolves around the problem of an explicit mobilization of censorship laws, by rendering the municipalities as competent actors in shaping what is and can be said and expressed by these alternative theatres through the power of closure. Knowing that the problem of censorship is ever present throughout Turkish theatre history, either hindering the promotion of conservative and religious forms during the authoritarian secular period of the 1930s, or excluding left wing ideas during the 1980 Military Coup Period; today, the promotion of conservative
and authoritarian values by the AKP government rearticulates censorship mechanisms in such a way that they pose a threat to freedom of expression in the case of alternative theatres. This seems at least partially related to the impact of the Gezi demonstrations: in line with the overall negative attitude of the AKP government towards those artists that supported the Gezi demonstrations, all interviewees from the alternative theatres indicated that after their presence in the Gezi events, they can no longer be supported by the Ministry grants and Beyoğlu Municipality.

The closing down of Kumbaracı 50 in 2010 for not having fire stairs, is a clear case in this context and one that has been widely discussed in the mainstream media. Kumbaracı 50 was closed shortly after submitting their license application to the municipality, which shows the important role of licensing as a source of power. Kumbaracı 50, in proximity to the Tophane neighbourhood where a devout Muslim community lives, was at the time preparing a play called Yala ama Yutma (Lick but Don’t Swallow) that received severe criticism from a national conservative newspaper for insulting the values of Islam. Agreeing with all interviewees that perceive this closure as a form of censorship, with the issue of fire stairs used as an excuse, one interviewee from Kumbaracı 50 links this closure to wider questions concerning the relation between municipalities and alternative theatres:

"Indeed the problem is deep-seated. I mean why we are obliged to squeeze in those spaces, or why we can’t go to the municipality and ask a space for performing our theatre. This is the way it has to be, however, as we are not civilised enough so everybody tries to take care only of themselves. The moment that they want to close down our spaces because we have no fire stairs, they are right. However the problem is that they don’t make any effort for solving the situation. So, there is no relation between us and them and no path forward.

Her reflection on the limited interest of the municipality in finding a solution for alternative theatres leads her to further thoughts on the limits set to freedom of expression. In her opinion, she expresses the basis of these limitations by saying “[...] however if they want to keep the boundaries – and if it is difficult to keep these boundaries in art – then yes, try to solve the situation; they have already created this economy through other means, so here it’s difficult to keep the boundaries they define” and she continues “when I say ‘boundaries’ I talk over the questions about the control of public morals. Whose public morals? Who will control it? Then you can understand why they try to put down these boundaries”.

Invisibility

This combined impact of licensing and censorship mechanisms within the urban environment of Istanbul leads to a third moment of regulation, namely the structured invisibility of alternative theatres in Istanbul. On a basic level, this is the result of alternative theatres locating in back streets, where they can afford the rents, and off the main roads or public highways. Related to the problem of limited opportunity to put up orientation signs or larger signboards – a combination of lack of funds to do so and municipal licensing – this means that alternative theatres for most people are simply invisible (see photograph). One of our interviewees highlights this as follows: “Indeed, you should not try and seek after a theatre hall, just as you don’t search for a public office or a car gallery, all of which have frightfully big signboards. You saw that we have a teeny signboard, just as other alternative spaces do. Our only way of obtaining a big signboard from the Municipality is to spend an enormous amount of money [...] otherwise they don’t care about us”. Similarly, another interviewee described the problem of licensing and invisibility through further thoughts: “First of all, we want work permits from municipalities. Nobody wants to do something illegal. We don’t do anything bad or concealed. We are asking for licences from the municipalities; however, among their thousands of responsibilities, young people who want to do theatre have no importance”.

What we see here is that besides the visual invisibility of alternative theatres in the city, they also perceive themselves invisible from the point of municipalities. Therefore, this type of regulation creating a structured invisibility that leads to a nonrelation in the sense that relations between alternative theatres and Beyoğlu Municipality are often based on avoiding contact. It is clear that earlier attempts to communicate with the Municipality to request licensing or to fulfil promotional needs, developed in the context of the start of the Joint Initiative in 2011, have not been continued until today. This lack of trust and limited to
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no encounter between different publics clearly shows in the interviews:

"For my future projects in public space, I don’t think I will stay in Beyoğlu. I made a clean break; I am not considering Beyoğlu. Our third public space project can take place in Beşiktaş or in Kadıköy [...] I mean, it’s clear that the ranks are divided [...] now is not the time for a Jean d’Arc kind of heroism, by entering into a state of conflict. Okay, I will fight for my thoughts as an opponent through other media, but I won’t right now for performing my art."

"I think as much as we complain about how they don’t do us any favours, it won’t work. I always say that I should find another solution, because I didn’t do anything when relying on the Municipality. I don’t know what my friends will think about that, but neither does the Municipality trust me nor do I trust them."

It should also be noted that the shared feeling among all interviewees was one of frustrated efforts to communicate with the Municipality in the past and a lack of energy or will to try again: expressions such as “we feel tired now” or “we lost the motivation” were recurring phrases in the interviews. However, as we will argue in the next section, it is this very invisibility and sense of frustration towards the Municipality that also impacts the formation of network relations between alternative theatres and that constitutes a promise for democratising urban spaces.

Organizing theatre spaces and networks

It is within this urban landscape of formal and informal state regulation that alternative theatre networks try to find spaces for theatre performance and, in doing so, shape the urban neighbourhoods in which they operate. In this section we discuss the organizational dynamics of these theatre spaces and networks, focusing on three elements: First, the main survival tactics pursued by alternative theatres; second, the ways in which these tactics involve collective actions that bypass more traditional, hierarchical modes of organisation; and third, the extent to which this leads to the creation of micro-publics that contribute to the city as a site of democracy.

Tactics

In order to understand the survival tactics of the ‘second generation’ of theatre makers, we need to look first at the tactics adopted by some the ‘first generation’ pioneers: DOT, Garaj Istanbul and Kumbaracı 50.

DOT (http://www.go-dot.org/) was the first theatre group that brought the in-your-face wave to Istanbul in 2005, adopted a revolutionary way of communication by developing different publicity tactics and by attracting remarkable attention from the media. However, as Başar (2014) argues their ticket price policy and location choice for shopping malls that mostly target white collar workers has limited the creation of a diverse audience. Secondly, Garaj Istanbul started in 2007 and was a pioneer example of using individual support mechanisms and sponsorships to fund a theatre space independent from state funding. They collected 500.000 Turkish Lira from 100 contributors, with that they succeeded to convince the Ministry of Culture to provide support through one state bank and a state controlled lottery service. As a result, for the first time in the Turkish history an independent theatre space opened with the support of both public and private sectors (Dervişoğlu and Aysun 2008). Finally, Kumbaracı 50 (http://kumbaraci50.com/) was founded in 2009 and followed the same tactic as Garaj Istanbul in terms of gaining individual support from various contributors. In contrast to Garaj Istanbul, however, Kumbaracı 50 was an initiative of an independent theatre group called Altıdan Sonra Tiyatro (Theatre after 6 p.m.), whose members had started as amateurs during their university education at Istanbul Technical University in the 1990s. While performing for 10 years on different stages, they continued to have other jobs such as academic, engineer or architect and they used parts of their income to open their own theatre space. Kumbaracı 50 has thus introduced another model that makes it possible to open small scale alternative theatre spaces with the support of small amounts of individual contributions as well as investing money from other jobs. We would argue that this ‘mixed funding’ tactic was a key contributing factor to the spread of alternative spaces across Istanbul in the 2010s, since the success of the pioneers encouraged many other young people to start their own theatre spaces.
Collective actions

Building on these tactics and learning from each other’s initiatives, alternative theatres started developing collective actions in order to support each other, find solutions for common problems and increase their visibility. This was formalized through the formation of the Alternative Theatres Joint Initiative in 2011. Mainly consisting of alternative theatres located in the Beyoğlu district, it operated from the very beginning in a context of urban renewal and gentrification processes that threaten the existence of alternative theatre spaces. Relying on rented spaces, the theatres are always in danger of losing their location when a landlord finds a more profitable tenant. The theatres also share the same spatial characteristics in the sense that they are blackbox stages and locate in the back streets of the main avenues. This ‘forced’ settlement in the back streets with lower rents gives these spaces a collective interest in terms of self-definition, visibility and survival in Istanbul.

By dealing with very concrete aims such as sharing costs for promotion, the Joint Initiative addresses practical concerns and ties in with the daily working practices of the theatre makers. This has the effect that different theatres start developing similar and collective modes of working: ranging from opening new theatre spaces and working together in different phases of the renovation and management of the spaces to collectively managing the Joint Initiative. The following interview quotes give an indication of this process:

"While we were having breakfast, we and our friends from ikinci Kat, just realized that we could get a leaflet printed for 400 TL; so we said let’s share the cost 200 TL each and print a leaflet for all of us. So, we decided to share this idea with other alternative stages, and this is how the collective has emerged [...] I mean, it did not appear as a conscious attempt at organisation, but it served that purpose."

Similarly, other interviewees emphasize the role of friendly meetings in enabling the continuation of collective activities and, in doing so, revealed the importance of collective reflection and spontaneous support in the face of challenges:

"Sometimes they ask if we ‘organise’ meetings. Sure, we are meeting, but it is not a desk bound organisation: we go to a café, laugh together... The most important thing here for me lies in the process of thinking together [...] as we have no formal agreement or a contract that obliges us to get together like other associations."

"I think this is a kind of group that achieves a way of standing together, different than the many other people over the years doing theatre here in Turkey. None of them supported each other like this. I mean it’s not easy to stand together, to share problems, and search for solutions for these 10 theatre spaces; I found their attempt very valuable. We are so similar to each other; if one of us has some technical problems we can call another in the next street and ask them to bring some equipment, for example. I think this is nice; this is cooperation; it brings our all our wishes for producing together. In that way, you feel stronger.”

The fact that cooperation is associated with ‘strength’ by all of our informants points to another fact that each theatre space of the Joint Initiative perceives themselves as collaborator instead of competitor of the same field. In this context, many activities that they prepared together like AltFest, being the first alternative theatre festival during which they play on each other’s stage, the organisation of seminars about conceptual discussions on alternative theatres are part of their efforts to increase their visibility by supporting each other. For instance, the concert organisation called ‘Songs from Backstage’ carries the aim of supporting Şermola Performans (www.sermolaperformans.com) who faced severe financial problems in 2015. Beyond these activities aimed at sharing their audience and creating financial support mechanisms to enable survival, the theatres also organize social responsibility projects to direct the attention of their audience to socio-political problems. For instance, they played for the benefit of Tiyatro Medresesi (http://www.pam.org.tr/WPEng/), or for helping Van, a city in south-eastern Turkey, after the earthquake.

At this point, it should be noted that the use of social media appears an important aspect for providing both the spontaneity and the cooperation among themselves. As one interviewee states “Many of us has minimum 10.000 followers, it can reach also 20.000 or 30.000 and within our followers there are
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many celebrities known from film and television series, so our campaigns which start in Twitter can spread to a wider audience. So when we just started small scale Twitter actions and then it gets bigger.” Besides using social media for their visibility, in their daily lives they are regularly in contact through their mobile phone applications. Although they can’t meet regularly due to their workload, the use of these kinds of applications keep continuous their contact and enable them to be aware of their problems, to think and to find solutions about the problems in a spontaneous way. A very concrete statement below expresses how their use of social media forms a basis for their spontaneity and cooperation that resulted in a feeling of strength:

“Last year, one of our artists was taken into custody. During this process, we really felt the support of alternative theatres. Due to the Twitter hashtag, this issue can create a significant impact on media [...] Now, I am very happy to be part of them. For our generation, we believe that we’ll be more powerful if we stand together. We think over our problems together, and we talk together about our coexistence. This is why this collective makes me feel good.”

**Micro-publics**

Although in general terms the audience of alternative theatres could be defined as the young, educated, urban population of Istanbul from the middle and upper middle class, this very small proportion of the Istanbulites leads us to scrutinize the role of alternative theatres in creating a loyal audience that constantly comes to these spaces. On the level of content, these spaces stage plays on, for example, LGBT individuals, women with headscarves or Kurdish people -- stories usually not seen in either publicly funded theatres or the commercial private theatres. In addition, due to the characteristics of blackbox stages, the experience of watching transforms from ‘theatrical’ into ‘real’ modes (Başar 2014: 170). Herein, the cooperative aspect seen in Joint Initiative manifests itself in the target of creating a loyal audience who have a similar world view with them as stated below:

“We aimed to put our spaces on the map. For instance, you know Kumbaraci 50 and you can know other stages through Kumbaraci 50; and anyone who comes to Şermola can go to Mekan Arti, and when he goes to Mekan Arti he becomes aware of a play in Tiyatro Hal. Besides increasing the visibility of our places, we also want to show the audience that there are even more spaces in which they can find plays made in a similar language and with a similar worldview.

Moreover, these spaces enable to meet people having a common sense of cultural taste in terms of loyalty to the same bookstores, cultural centres or theatres and meanwhile who are suffering from the same problems about their city and country like injustice, freedom of expression, intervention into the lifestyles, or closing down of their favourite cultural spaces due to neoliberal urban policies. The expression of one interviewee as “our spaces become meeting points after the closure of the important spaces like AKM” underlines the meaning of these spaces for their loyal audience who wants to preserve their lifestyle in the city through their cultural habits. Another interviewee emphasizes the significance of these alternative theatre spaces for the audience by saying “people who think like us think that they are in a ‘safe place’ from the moment he enters in this space he faces the things that he can’t confess or that he wants to shout out”. The descriptions such as ‘meeting point’, ‘safe place’ find meaning more clearly in the statement below by showing how these spaces create a life space for people who are discontent with the government’s policies:

“If our spaces exist, they become a ‘living space’ for the audience. They come to your theatre, and then on to the next bookstore, or the exhibition on the next corner. By doing this, you contribute to the forming of a space that people who have alternative views can breathe and live [...] When people come to our space, they say “I am not alone, 50 other people are also here tonight with me. Something is going wrong in this country, but there are also tens of hundreds of other people who, like me, feel uncomfortable with this situation”. So, this feeling gives you the power of survival. In that sense, our spaces feed an alternative view of life.”

At this point, we want to switch from the term audience to the concept of ‘public’ for defining people who display loyalty by coming regularly to these alternative theatre spaces and following consciously their performances with a hidden appetite to meet people who think like themselves and to feel safe while complaining about the actual problems in their city or country. In other words, the
life spaces created by the alternative theatres result also in the emergence of a specific public. The micro-publics created in and through these alternative theatre spaces is similar to Başar’s understanding of ‘performative publicness’, which refers to people that “watch a play together, share the story and talk about the ethical processes of the singular events of the story” and, in doing so, relate this story to “the publicness of Gezi Park resistance which had key terms of physically staying together and sharing” (Başar, 2014: 208). It also resonates with the argument of Firat and Bakçay that public space is not simply a given space but a bundle of network relations produced at any moment through collective actions. They put forward the term ‘aesthetic-political actions’ in order to link these collective actions with the new publicness formed by ‘bodily emotions’ during the Emek Movie protests in Istanbul (p.10). Herein the ‘emotional publicness’ appears as a key term that addresses a public created during the protests through the collectiveness of individual memories and longings about Emek Movie which represents a ‘first movie watched during childhood’ or ‘first kiss in a cinema’ (Firat and Bakçay, 2012: 13).

**Conclusion**

The main aim of this paper has been to investigate the ways in which alternative theatres shape the urban spaces in which they operate, how this in turn is regulated by local government regimes, and the extent to which these theatre spaces contribute to the city as a site of democracy. We observed two types of relationships that are in turn interdependent. First, starting from governance actions of the local municipalities, it becomes clear that the relations between alternative theatres and (Beyoğlu) Municipality are primarily shaped through two aspects of regulation, namely licensing and censorship, which leads to a very critical third one: a structured invisibility. This invisibility, having a critical role in the formation of the Joint Initiative in 2011, on the one hand resulted in actual non-relations between theatres and the Municipality, even to the extent of avoiding contact with the Municipality. On the other hand, this same invisibility plays an important role in shaping the network of alternative theatres – under the Joint Initiative – which connects them through collective actions.

The collectiveness, argued in this paper as a source of strength in the face of the dominant urban order draws its power from two dimensions: spontaneity and cooperation. Spontaneity, underlying the very foundation of the Joint Initiative is also seen in the collective actions where they gather by creating a visibility in the social and mainstream media. In that sense, it should be emphasized that through these spontaneous actions they actively take place in the urban social movements like Emek Movie protests, Gezi Events and We’re at AKM Initiative; and perpetually create awareness about the closure of the veteran art spaces or about the censorship cases. Accordingly, we would argue that they are democratizing urban spaces by being articulated in the urban social movements.

The second dimension is the horizontal relations through which each constituent perceives each other as collaborator for increasing their visibility in the city. By suffering from the similar spatial and locational problems, the alternative theatres believe that they can increase their visibility and they can survive in the neoliberal city only if they cooperate. Therefore, instead of seeing each other as competitors of the same field, they develop activities based on cooperation for putting their spaces on the map. Hence, it leads to a second breaking point for democratizing urban spaces: the production of a micro-public. More clearly, these alternative theatre spaces emerge as the new ‘meeting points’ within the neoliberal city which takes the life spaces of this micro public out of their hands; the new ‘safe places’ where this public can share freely their dissatisfaction about the regulations of the State.

Therefore, in terms of extending the limits of the democracy, the fact that The Joint Initiative disagrees with creating any contact with the Municipality leads to an essential problem: The efforts for avoiding contact and the state of non-relation, which close the doors on the confrontation between two opponent actors of the city, jeopardises the legitimacy of the alternative theatres in the eyes of Municipality and meanwhile the chance of being defined and visible in the city. However, this kind of relation keeps alive the struggle of the alternative theatres for their survival, by making the Joint Initiative an active agent within the neoliberal city.

Finally, this research which reveals an empirical output aimed to position alternative theatre – through the Joint Initiative – as a promising agent within the neoliberal city based on their common
struggles not only originating from their concerns about censorship but mainly stemming from the concerns about their spaces. Accordingly, a dichotomy is presented between the very invisibility of these alternative theatres and the hidden strength that they possess as an active urban agent by implying a space of hope. This finding requires us to examine, in further research, the relations between alternative theatre and the urban space from a theoretical perspective which will lead to a more advanced conceptualization of these relations.

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