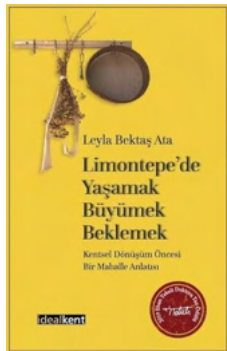


## Book Reviews

**Leyla Bektaş Ata 2021: *Limontepe’de Yaşamak Büyüme Beklemek: Kentsel Dönüşüm Öncesi Bir Mahalle Anlatısı* [Living, Growing and Waiting in Limontepe: Narrative of a Neighborhood Before Urban Transformation]. Ankara: İdealKent.**



The 2000s are frequently described as a period of rapid urban transformation and anti-participatory, neoliberalist urbanization in Turkey. Throughout this period, urban policies were directed towards restructuring the urban fabric via capital accumulation, as part of which there was an increasing focus on the perceived sociospatial problems of *gecekondu*, or people living in squatter housing. In many cases, state-led urban transformation projects were introduced without any form of participatory decision-making, resulting in the displacement of *gecekondu* residents to the new urban peripheries where they faced new forms of precarity and increasing social tensions.

Urbanization scholarship in Turkey has focused on both the mechanisms through which the state manages urban transformation and the communities that are dispossessed and displaced as a result of such state-led transformation. *Limontepe’de Yaşamak Büyüme Beklemek* [Living, Growing, and Waiting in Limontepe] is a groundbreaking work by Leyla Bektaş Ata based on her autoethnographic fieldwork in Limontepe, a *gecekondu* district in central Izmir. Bektaş Ata lived there for fifteen years herself and describes the district as her childhood neighborhood. Ten years after leaving Limontepe, she returned to conduct research in an attempt to write down the history of this place and its subjects before the state-led urban transformation had begun:

I hope to make a note in history just before the current urban policies eliminate[d] the neighborhood, before they displace[d] the streets, gardens, balconies and corners where the meanings that make us who we are are based and where our memories are grounded (p. 33; reviewer’s translation).<sup>1</sup>

Bektaş Ata excavates her personal background as a tool for analyzing the neighborhood and its past in the present. At the same time, she faces the complications of carrying out autoethnography. In this regard, the book introduces an intimate discussion on the way subjectivity and individual experiences can find a

<sup>1</sup> Mevcut kent politikaları mahalleyi ortadan kaldırmadan, bizi biz yapan anlamların temellendiği, hatıralarımızın zemin bulduğu sokakları, bahçeleri, balkonları, köşe başlarını yerinden etmeden hemen önce tarihe not düşmeyi umuyorum.

place in the production of spatial knowledge. It also considers the extent to which such experiences, together with the researcher's background, can be placed at the heart of the production of knowledge.

In the first part of the book, 'Knowledge of the Field', Bektaş Ata discusses feminist methodologies and autoethnography alongside their possible limitations and challenges. She documents and examines various situations through field notes, including records of her emotions and the constantly changing tactics she uses during interviews. In this way, she is able to question her positionality and self-reflexivity at every stage of the process, while making extensive use of direct quotations to allow the reader to hear the voices of the participants directly.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Bektaş Ata has a sense of fear when she enters the field and begins to record her field notes, and in her analysis of this emotional process she names it 'fear of the field' (*saha korkusu*):

Fear of the field is closely related to the tension created by connecting with people from the neighborhood and from different classes and lifestyles after a long time, as well as the possibility of examining my own personal past and being uncomfortable with what I remember (p. 48; reviewer's translation).<sup>3</sup>

Bektaş Ata narrates various conditions and situations associated with being a woman in Limontepe, coping with social pressure (*mahalle baskısı*), place-making, unrecorded labor, and communal spatial strategies and tactics. The subsequent sections of the book, organized around the same themes, then carefully lead the reader to think about the emotions and perceptions of living and growing up in this specific locality before the impending state-led urban transformation was initiated. Rather than simplistic dichotomies of state/society, informality/formality and domination/resistance, the narrative provides a sense of place as experienced by Limontepe's residents.

When I first saw the title *Living, Growing, and Waiting in Limontepe*, the word 'waiting' particularly grabbed my attention. 'Waiting' is a state that is both implicitly and explicitly embedded in uncertain and precarious urban conditions. While many cities in Turkey have been subjected to rapid transformation projects on institutional grounds created by urban transformation laws over the last two decades, current urban scholarship argues that such state-led urban transformation projects caused a boom in construction and worked to maximize land profit and rents. In essence, they facilitated land speculation rather than encouraging the development of affordable housing<sup>4</sup> or participatory renewal processes for *gecekondu* areas like Limontepe or more livable environments for city inhabitants. Consequently, waiting is a widespread phenomenon of citizenship in modern-day Turkey, as individuals are subjected to the reproduction of sociospatial precarity and uncertainty.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For the author's recent publication on this methodology, see: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14661381231171300>

<sup>3</sup> Saha korkusu, mahalleliyle uzun zaman sonra ve farklı sınıfsallık ve yaşam biçiminden bağlantı kuracak olmanın yarattığı gerilimin yanı sıra kendi kişisel geçmişimi mercek altına alma ve hatırlayacaklarımdan rahatsızlık duyma ihtimaliyle de yakından ilişkili.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of housing and issues of state-led urbanization, see: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10511482.2019.1670715>

<sup>5</sup> See also: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/idealkent/issue/69398/975344>

Bektaş Ata's book is one of the first works in which this conceptualization has appeared in the Turkish urbanization literature. Moreover, she accurately analyzes the state of waiting according to the spatial practices and experiences of those who undergo it. She defines the Limontepe residents' state of waiting as having started with the need for infrastructure in the early stages of urban transformation policymaking and continuing with the need for a just form of urban transformation:

Waiting permeates every move of the *gecekondu* resident. From the first moment *gecekondu* residents step into the city, starting to build a home and a neighborhood as well as neighborly relations and other relations, they learn to wait in this urban life in which they are included from the periphery: waiting to have electricity, water, telephone services, sanitation, road and transportation services; waiting to benefit from the zoning amnesties that arise from time to time; waiting to obtain title deeds ... and, nowadays, waiting for urban transformation. Even though they have migrated to the city, life in a *gecekondu*—which is a place of uncertainty—remains open to the possibility of destruction at any moment. And so [the idea of] leaving the neighborhoods within which they have become residents lies buried somewhere in their minds and in their settlement practices (p. 209; reviewer's translation).<sup>6</sup>

Overall, this book expands the boundaries of academic production and explores Limontepe in a comprehensive manner. It serves as a compelling illustration of feminist methodologies, challenging the often invisible sources of knowledge and the processes through which knowledge is produced. Collectively, the use of lucid and accessible language and the specifics of the author's fieldwork methods (such as her field notes) make this book stand out. Bektaş Ata's work encourages and empowers deeply situated intersectional approaches to the study of places as spaces through complex spatial reflections on gendered experiences. It creates an inspiring foundation for problematizing the domination of taken-for-granted theories, the lack of inclusive perspectives, and the alienating gaze of academic analysis in the field of critical urban studies.

**Gülşah Aykaç**, Department of Architecture, Marmara University. Gülşah Aykaç's work focuses on sociospatial narratives of urbanization, diverse urban histories and contemporary work and labor processes in architecture. She is particularly interested in investigating places through feminist pedagogies and methodologies.

---

<sup>6</sup> Beklemek, gecekondulunun her hamlesine sirayet eder. Kente adım attığı andan itibaren evini, mahallesini, komşuluk ve diğer ilişkilerini inşa etmeye başlayan gecekondu, çeperinden dahil olduğu kent hayatında önce beklemeyi öğrenir: elektrik, su, telefon, kanalizasyon, yol ve ulaşım hizmetine kavuşmayı, dönem dönem gündeme gelen imar aflarından yararlanmayı, tapu almayı... ve şimdilerde kentsel dönüşümü. Kente göç etseler de belirsizliğin mekanı gecekonduya yaşamak her an yıkım geleceği ihtimaline açık olduğundan sakinine dönüştükleri mahallelerden ayrılmak da akıllarının ve yerleşme pratiklerinin bir yerinde saklı durur.