

## **An Attempt to See the Soul of the Change: Kreuzberg from Margins into the Center**

Reyhan ATASÜ TOPÇUOĞLU  
reyhan.atasu@gmail.com

Emrah AKBAŞ  
akbasemr@hacettepe.edu.tr

### **Değişimin Ruhunu Anlamaya Dair Bir Deneme: Kreuzberg'in Çevreden Merkeze Doğru Serencamı**

#### **Abstract**

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin has witnessed a great change. But a district in Berlin has been the symbol of this change: Kreuzberg. Once had been a ghetto just bordering the Wall, Kreuzberg found itself just in the center of the city after the fall. This research tries to understand Kreuzberg as a transnational space and its transformation after the unification of Germany, 1989.

**Key Words** : Kreuzberg, Berlin Wall, Lefebvre's Theory of Space, Transnationalism, Place, Space.

**JEL Classification Codes** : Z19.

#### **Özet**

Berlin Duvarı'nın yıkılmasının ardından Berlin büyük bir değişime tanıklık etti. Ancak Berlin'de bir semt bu değişimin simgesi oldu: Kreuzberg. Bir zamanlar Duvar'ın dibinde bir getto olan Kreuzberg, Duvar'ın yıkılmasıyla birlikte kendini şehrin tam ortasında buluverdi. Bu araştırma Kreuzberg'i bir ulusötesi alan olarak anlamaya çalışmakta ve Almanya'nın 1989'da birliğinin kurulumunu müteakiben bu ulusötesi alandaki dönüşüme odaklanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler** : Kreuzberg, Berlin Duvarı, Lefebvre'nin Mekân Teorisi, Ulusötecilik, Mekân, Alan.



## 1. Introduction

Lefebvre's theory of space is based on the idea that space is a product of human beings and that physical is reproduced in space. Space in Lefebvre's thought is not only a physical being, but also something to be constantly reproduced via interaction. Space is a social construction shaping spatial relations and conceptions. A space is not only a mere sum of its components or inhabitants, but also constituted by their interrelationships. It is not solely a part of nature, nor relies upon constant laws, but also, as it is apparent in the name of his book *The Production of Space*, a mere product. It is a product of human act reproduced via human agency in order to create a space to live in. In Lefebvre's words, "social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: Rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder" (Lefebvre, 1991).

In this framework, space is never a sole place of life, it is more than life that is constructed and experienced on it or all the activities that exist. Nevertheless, all the activities and life in a space coming into being shape and reproduce the form and content of it. All the content from architecture to placement is a result of both interactions and negotiations between various classes or forces of the space. It is in this sense that Lefebvre does not define these actors of the space as "subjects" unless they create a "space" after passing all through this stage (Lefebvre, 1991).

Lefebvre developed "a conceptual triad" in explaining space. *Spatial practice* refers to the dialectic of objects and products. *Representations of space* are linked with the relations of production and the "order" meaning knowledge, signs, codes and frontal relations. It is a "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (Lefebvre, 1991). *Representational spaces* are "lived" spaces —experienced by its inhabitants – referring to the dialectics between spatial relations and representations of spaces.

An existing space may divert from its original purpose and *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and be re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one (<http://www.notbored.org/space.html>). A very good example of such re-appropriation is the case of Kreuzberg, Berlin.

As the writing of Lefebvre shows, we cannot talk about a deeply rooted ontological difference between place and space – as in some other arguments like the literature in transnationalism – since the former is also a construction or, as Larsen (2004) puts properly, a socialization of space. Space is socialized by its inhabitants who are not constant either, moving in and out, changing themselves and the place itself, and negotiating the structures. According to Larsen (2004), places in this sense are not stable entities but are created and re-created by historical processes representing values, perceptions and practices.

Constitution of space in this way also implies an interaction between physical space and social space. The actors of space – in the form of inhabitants, classes, etc. – continuously re-create the physical space as being re-created by the space itself. Geographical structure or architecture of the space is apparently open or prone to change as the actors themselves are changing. As Larsen (2004) argues, for instance, when society is hierarchical then the physical space also becomes hierarchical. Lefebvre (1991) makes a distinction between “domination” and “appropriation” as he explains the competition for the production of space. Domination operates mostly as the state power to control the population via an “abstract” purpose. Therefore, change in physical space and hence in social space can both be up-down and bottom-up. It is obvious that politics of space would have a lot to tell about antagonisms, contradictions or continuities within the space all through the change since the space is a scene of negotiation between the subject and the space itself.

This article weaves a link between two important theoretical approaches to space through the example of Kreuzberg, namely political geography of Henri Lefebvre and transnational social space. In that sense, the transnationalist approach to the issue of migration can be interpreted as an important turn in the representations of space which is extracted from the representational space of migrants and which may influence their spatial practices. This article also aims to show how change of placement via political change can influence the spatial practice and representational spaces within the example of Kreuzberg which was once a low profile district near by the Wall now placed in the core of the city. In other words, this article asserts that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the new political era that started after changed Berlin’s placement in the political discourse and spatial representations of Berlin from a space of defense to a space of recovery and “renaissance”. The recovery theme of spatial representation can be openly seen from the never-ending reparation of the East Berlin since the fall of the Wall which resembles the never-ending construction of *La Sagrada Familia*, a 20<sup>th</sup> century church project by Architect Antoni Gaudi started in 1882 in Barcelona, Spain.

In the example of Kreuzberg, it is possible to identify the relations between space and place, in terms of how the relations between representations of space and representational spaces are reflected on place. We try to show how migration policies

influence the spatial practice in Kreuzberg as the state's intervention to space and to trace these relations in the concreteness of place. And we also try to show how the changes in migrants' identities in time and via generations shaped the practice of space. While seeking the traces of these questions, we have been involved in an intense amount of participant observation, and conducted interviews with laymen and a political refugee.

## 2. Berlin, the Odyssey of the Center

Berlin was established with Cologne as the earliest two settlement centers, Wendish villages in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its importance has increased during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and served as the seat of electors of Branderburg, the capital city of Kingdom of Prussia (1701-1918) which between 1871 and 1918 was the leading state of the German Empire. Berlin continued to be the capital city of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) and the Third Reich (1933-1945) (Ladd, 1998). The consequence and irony of the destiny of being such an important city has brought Berlin not only, impressive architecture, crowds and fame but also destructions. The Thirty Years War (1618-48) almost destroyed Berlin completely, but Frederick William, called the Great Elector, restored the city. Berlin was further occupied in the Seven Years War by Austrian (1757) and Russian (1760) troops and in the Napoleonic Wars by the French (1806-8) (Tusa, 1997). But surely during ups and downs of her history the most corrosive period is the one she had experienced after the Second World War which started her journey out of the center.

On May 8, 1945 city was divided into sectors by the Potsdam Conference which resulted in severe tension between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. The Soviets occupied the sector that subsequently became known as East Berlin. West Berlin was constituted by the occupation of the British, American, and French forces. The joint Allied military government (*Kommandatura*) was terminated when the USSR informally withdrew in 1948 (Gittus, 2002).

The status of Berlin was one of the major cold war issues, and in 1948, Soviets set a blockade on all land and water communications between West Berlin and West Germany. The blockade was withdrawn in May 1949, East Berlin was proclaimed the capital of the new German Democratic Republic and in 1950 West Berlin was formed as a state of the Federal Republic of Germany (Gittus, 2002).

In the following years there began a massive flow of refugees from East to West. To stop the flow, East Germans erected the 47-km fortified Berlin Wall in August 1961. Only in December 1963, West Berliners were able to visit relatives in the eastern zone. Before the division of the city, Berlin's economy had been primarily industrial, but industrial capital has left the city after it became an island during the Cold War. Even the

government had to provide subsidies for the citizens who would like to live in Berlin (Ladd, 1998).

Berlin still carries all the different symbols of the different regimes of her history such as Berliner Dom and Television Tower, which are all in the process of wearing different symbolic meanings. Also the places that these symbols are standing are changing according to the representations of space in Berlin. Since the unification of Germany, Berlin has returned to her main position of being the center. The politics of space has changed during this process. This change in representations of space continued with direct interventions of the state and private sector to place of Berlin. One of the good examples of this reflection of change in representational spaces on place is the change of Alexanderplatz, which used to be a big Square for the labor demonstrations, but now filled with Malls and hotels, which can be read as the symbols of the change of the regime, of rising economy of the city and the turn from being a city of industry to being a city of service sector.

Berlin as the odyssey of the center has left her position with the end of the Second World War, went through various quests, divided and reunited, changed her economic mode from industry to service sector, and changed architecturally and spatially. Today she turned back to the center again as the capital and the largest city of Germany.

### **3. Kreuzberg, from Margins to the Center**

Kreuzberg was founded in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a working class neighborhood in today's Luisenstadt (once called *Köpenicker Feld*) which is nearby the today's center of Kreuzberg. It was so suitable for working class settlement since it was located on the costs of the Spree River which made transportation of the raw materials easier and served as a reservoir for trade effluent. A century later an industrial-residential and commercial district was established in today's place of Kreuzberg. Soon it was overcrowded by the migrants from rural areas to this newly emerged workers' district of the city of Berlin. Within a year in 1871, 100,000 immigrants in total moved to this district (Till, 2005). So it may be stated that Kreuzberg was constructed as a space of industrial relations and migrants. Therefore, its representations as space have always been dominated with the themes of migration, of low classes, of conflict. Kreuzberg can be interpreted as the dialectical spatial practice of the growing Berlin.

In order to understand the context of the state intervention into the migrant's places in Kreuzberg and in general, one has to keep in mind the two different periods of migration in Europe and also in Germany. The first period is the golden age of migration so called *Lestrente Glorieuses* (30 golden years) between 1945 and 1973, especially the

decade of the 1960s was the peak of this trend. In this phase, the scarcity of labor power for building the new Germany was transacted by importing low skilled labor. These migrant workers could be rapidly absorbed in the labor market and their returns to labor was high (Randall, 2004). During this flow, both the governments and migrants believed that these people would return to their homes when their tasks finished. This belief is one of the most important themes on the policies on migrants and construction of their space including their social space and placement.

On the other hand, the most important development in the history of Kreuzberg in terms of its spatial transformation is the construction of the Wall in 1961, which put the district on the outskirts of the city. Soon after in 1963, the Senate announced the first urban renewal program which foresaw settlement of 140,000 inhabitants and building of 60,000 apartments in some parts of the city including Kreuzberg (Ladd, 1998).

The international labor migration went hand in hand with the new construction endeavor after the wall. Thought and named as guest workers (*gastarbeiters*) in the beginning, the immigrants were placed mainly in Kreuzberg. This was also an active state intervention to space via regulation of place since the policy simply matches temporary migrants' housing needs with the houses of Kreuzberg which were waiting to be demolished according to the new city plan. So, the existence of the houses of Kreuzberg was temporary as the guest workers should have been.

Becoming a migrant working class district now in the outskirts of the city, Kreuzberg got the lowest average income per capita, the highest percentage of children, and the lowest conditions in terms of physical structure and infrastructure in Berlin during especially in the second half of the 1970s (Ladd, 1998).

The oil crises in the 1973 closed the golden age of migration, and the second era shrank the quotas for labor migration started at the end of the 1980s. Also during this era, the changes in the global capitalism increased the gap between the host and destination. In Germany family unification policies started to be implemented in this era as well. All these add up to a "boomerang effect" (Chapin, 1997) in the German case, migrants decided to stay longer. In year 2000 63% of the residents of Kreuzberg were from Turkey, which means that a half of the Turkish population in Germany is concentrated on the 4% of the German soil (Kastoryano, 2000). The very reason behind their decision to stay longer is the fact that the second generation of migrants joined all the spheres of life besides work after the 1980s, and they began to feel themselves as a part of where they were – they were not guests anymore, at least they did not think this way.

#### 4. State Intervention to Place – Case of Kreuzberg

Being a migrant-working class district and having such low conditions of life, Kreuzberg has appeared as the center of the political opposition hosting so many riots. The state's control of the antagonistic nature of the district became mandatory. Especially in the second half of the 1980s, Kreuzberg found itself on the focus of city planning. Thousands of buildings were renewed, schools were opened, and many social projects were started. The following excerpts are from public interviews with Turkish residents of Kreuzberg:

“...It was a big campaign. Not the interior, but only the exterior of the houses was renewed. The state met the cost without any expectation of return payment...” (From interview with Ms. S, 2008)

“Kreuzberg used to be the dirtiest part of the city” (From interview with Mr. A, 2008)

The big turn of the political atmosphere in 1989 changed the route of the Berlin's voyage again to the center and the fate of Kreuzberg from an outskirt district replacing it right in the center of the city. This was the year of the fall of the Wall. Result was that not only Berlin but also Kreuzberg found themselves just on the center.

Having long been a working class district and later transformed into a migrant settlement, Kreuzberg witnessed the formation of a Turkish diaspora in the 1970s. It was a diaspora because Turkish migrants defined themselves only as Turks and saw their integration to Germany only within the context of their job rejecting the identity formation in relation to Germany.

“Everybody used to say that ‘our roots are here, but our eyes are always on our homeland’ (she means the first and second generations of migrants)” (From interview with Ms. S, 2008)

Reflections of such an identity formation appeared as the symbolic reference to Turkey especially in cafes, pubs and restaurants. Furthermore, their involvement in civil society contributed to the symbolic accumulation which refers to the country of origin. Most of the NGOs of Turkish migrants were based on solidarity; some specifically focused on the people from the same city or even the village in Turkey reinforcing and constituting the bonds, and some focused on identity formation aimed at conserving and reproducing traditional and cultural links with the country of origin (such as the Association for Solidarity with the People from the Eastern Black Sea, the Association of the People from Rize, and so on). Therefore, Kreuzberg was shaped symbolically as a space which directly refers to Turkey. In the end, it began to be called as “Klein Istanbul” (Small Istanbul).

“In the 1980s, Oranienstrasse was called as Istiklal Street (a famous pedestrian street-mall in Istanbul). Turks dominated the street. There was aesthetics of Turkish shops. Boutique shops of the neighborhood...” (From interview with Ms. A, 2008)

However, after all these changes, Kreuzberg does not represent a structure frozen with static symbols. As generations of migrants change, identity formation also changes. The new identities have much more complicated symbolic orders. Therefore, new generations with such identity formations cannot be analyzed in a diaspora framework. That is to say, the space these people have created and their relationship to place should be thought within their own specificity going beyond the limits of the diaspora discussions.

Instead of stretching the term “diaspora” beyond its limits, it is more meaningful to speak of a segmented and transnationalized cultural space, characterized by the syncretistic identities and populated by sundry ethnic, national, religious and sub-cultural groups: transnational means that cultural elements from both the countries of origin and destination have found entry in the cultural repertoire of the descendants of migrants, aided by constant border-crossing communication (Faist, 2000)

The concept of transnationalism is especially developed (Bash et al., 1995; Faist, 1998) to analyze the international migration flows and relations of international migrants among each other, to host and destination societies. The idea of transnational relations implies a more holistic approach to evaluate contemporary international political and economic relations (Stack, 1981). It is only this way that Kreuzberg as a place can be analyzed as a transnational space. Once had been diasporic, symbols of Kreuzberg have been transformed into transnational symbols after the second half of 1990s.

“... in the 1990s an excessive number of discos and pubs were opened. Once being a place of the nights of poems and novels, Kreuzberg left its place to groups of youngsters wandering around with bottles of beer in their hands...” (From interview with Mr. H, 2008)

Transnationaliation of Kreuzberg as a space has marked the state and market intervention into the place. The market and state intervention to space via regulating place fostered after the re-placement of Kreuzberg after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“After the fall of the wall and the unification, business that used to be in the West moved to the East. People from the West started new businesses.” (From interview with Mr. H, 2008.)

Since the fall of the Wall shifted Kreuzberg's place right into center bordering the historical centre Mitte. In time with the reconstruction of place the bordering relation of Kreuzberg and Mitte has been turning into unification.

“The state supported Turks. For instance, they were supported to open huge supermarkets. First of all, Turks were tamed...” (From interview with Mr. A, 2008.)

State and market intervention into the place can clearly be seen from the increasing construction in the area. And the form of the construction and renewal of the district are on the basis of tourist attraction. With rapidly increasing constructions of the last four years, Kreuzberg has become the third biggest part of Berlin that contains most of the hotels, restaurants, cafes and pubs (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2007). New buildings, cafes, pubs, and restaurants have become the building blocks of the new Kreuzberg ordering spatial and social relationships.

“Mehrinkopf is a typical example of the change. It had been the center of the left until the 2000s... European School was established there... Now it is almost waiting to be closed... There is no single pancarte on the walls; walls are very clear, just like the walls of Charlettonburg...” (From interview with Ms. A, 2008.)

Integration policies having the intention of spreading migrants all over the city and in housing estates to avoid segregation (Caglar, 2001) are basically a way of denying them a place of their own with common narratives, community feelings and identities (Larsen, 2004), but in Kreuzberg, despite the restricted number of Turks due to the strict quota policy of the German government, Turks have dominated the district and shaped it as a space with their own initiative reproducing and using their symbolic accumulation as a means of attraction though this process could be named as market intervention into the place as a control mechanism of the state and its place politics.

“Turks began to open restaurants. Germans like the Turkish cuisine... Italian and Greek restaurants do not have ethnic symbols in their design, but Turkish restaurants are full of ceramik tiles (*çini*), Turkish lights, etc.” (From interview with Ms. S, 2008.)

While transformation of Kreuzberg can be seen eventually as a symbol of resistance to the “conduct of conduct” imposed on them by the rest of the community or the society at large (Larsen, 2004) such deviance from the dominant social and physical space may be interpreted as the willingness or consent of migrants to integrate into the mainstream in their on way following a tacit negotiation with the state and society.

Migrants' agency in creating and protecting their identities and social space can also be raced by their active intervention into their living place.

“An awkward mosque was built at the corner of Wienerstrasse. For Turks, this means feeling their own existence architecturally, and shows the feeling of striking roots...” (Interview with Mr. A, 2008.)

All these complicated symbols migrants use constitute a transnational identity. There is such a transnational agency that chooses among these symbols by his/her will, and changes it if he/she wants. As a result, the transnational identity includes not only the parts from the two different cultures, but also symbols that go beyond them. Migrant as the agency may make use of these symbols in different forms in different times and situations. Therefore, place becomes something that gives us the opportunity to read the agency of the migrants.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper is a result of an endeavor to understand the physical and social transformation of Kreuzberg with reference to two theoretical approaches to space: Lefebvre's theoretical understanding of place and space and transnationalism as a means of understanding space.

Kreuzberg is a suitable example to identify the relations between space and place, in terms of how the relations between representations of space and representational spaces are reflected on place. What makes Kreuzberg unique is its population structure comprised mostly of Turkish migrants who have been the active agents of the constitution of spatial practices in Kreuzberg.

As mentioned, according to Lefebvre, there is not a deep ontological difference between space and place; and Kreuzberg is a good example to show that they are indeed interrelated. Since change in place effects social relations and actors living in that place, and also changes in social space are in time inscribed into place.

As we see, implementation of the city planning in the 1990s, which is a direct result of the German unification and the change in the placement of Berlin and Kreuzberg, is a direct intervention of the state to place which changed the representations of space in Kreuzberg. Spatial practices also changed and have still been changing via change in the representations of space and via change in its inhabitants. Its inhabitants have been changing both in terms of population and identity formation. Migrants have been forming

transnational identities and constructing a transnational space. All in all, these processes lead to the change of Kreuzberg as a representational space of working class into a space of cosmopolitanism.

## References

- Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg (2007), *Die Kleine Berlin-Statistik*.
- Caglar, A.S. (2001), "Constraining Metaphors and the Transnationalisation of Spaces in Berlin," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4: 601-613.
- Chapin, W.D. (1997), *Germany for the Germans? The Political Effects of International Migration*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Faist, T. (1998), "Transnational Social Spaces out of International Migration: Evolution, Significance and Future Prospects", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 39, 2: 213-247.
- Faist, T. (2000), *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Gittus, E.J. (2002), "Berlin as a Conduit for the Creation of German National Identity at the End of the Twentieth Century," *Space and Polity*, Volume 6, Number 1, pp. 91-115(25).
- Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, <<http://www.notbored.org/space.html>>, 17.05.2009.
- Kastoryano, R. (2000), *Kimlik Pazarlığı: Fransa ve Almanya'da Devlet ve Göçmen İlişkileri*, Ankara: İletişim Yayınları.
- Ladd, B. (1998), *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, University Of Chicago Press.
- Larsen, J.E. (2004), "The Politics of Marginal Space," [to be published in J. Andersen & B. Siim (eds.): *Politics of Inclusion and Empowerment – A Gender and Citizenship Perspective*, Palgrave].
- Randall, H. (2004), "Migration to Europe since 1945: Its History and its Lessons," in Sarah Spencer (Ed.) *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*. Blackwell.
- Stack, John F. (1981), "Ethnicity and Transnational Relations: An Introduction," in Stack, John F. (Ed.) *Ethnic Identities in a Transnational World*, pp. 3–6.
- Till, K.E. (2005), *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Tusa, A. (1997), *The Last Division: A History of Berlin, 1945-1989*, Perseus Books.