



## Constantinople in the Heart: An Urban Anthropological Picture of How Istanbul's Former Greek Minority Remember Their City

Romain Örs, *İlay. Diaspora of the City: Stories of Cosmopolitanism from Istanbul and Athens*, New York: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 264 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-55485-7

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Submitted/Başvuru: 13.09.2023

Accepted/Kabul: 12.10.2023

Published Online/Online Yayın: 08.01.2024

**Citation/Atf:** Cengiz, N.B. Constantinople in the heart: an urban anthropological picture of how Istanbul's former Greek minority remember their city. [Review of "Diaspora of the City: Stories of Cosmopolitanism from Istanbul and Athens" by İlay Romain Örs]. *Istanbul Anthropological Review - İstanbul Antropoloji Dergisi*, 3, 123-130. <https://doi.org/10.26650/IAR2023-1359702>

**Keywords:** Istanbul, Cosmopolitanism, Greek Minority, Migration, Diaspora

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İstanbul, Kozmopolitlik, Rum Azınlık, Göç, Diyaspora



In the book *Diaspora of the City: Stories of Cosmopolitanism from Istanbul and Athens*, İlay Romain Örs (2017) uses extensive ethnographic research and in-depth theoretical discussions of relevant concepts to present an elaborate and convincing argument on the unique cosmopolitanism of the Greek Orthodox community of Constantinople (Rum Polites), the majority of whom live in Athens today. In the book, Örs questions the applicability of the concepts of diaspora, minority, and migrant community for Rum Polites, redefining them in the context of Rum Polites as she revisits these concepts through an incredibly rich array of references to the literature.

In this first anthropological study of the displaced Greek minority (the Rums) of Istanbul, Örs succeeds in two not-very-compatible tasks simultaneously: redefining complex concepts through challenging theoretical arguments and navigating through ethnographic stories in an exquisitely humane and warm manner. Örs's admirable authorship enables her to smoothly move from delicately crafted high theory to passages with personal anecdotes and observations elaborated upon with depictions that would be expected from a top-caliber novelist. Her communication skills in general and excellent command of the Greek language in particular, as well as her bond with the community, enable Örs to write about Rum Polites entirely free of clichés and stereotypes, hence the feeling throughout the book that it has been written by a member of the community. While Örs is not a community member *per se*, that she almost becomes one during her fieldwork is not difficult to see, as well as afterward, as she continues her relations with many of her informants.

There is a literary feeling to *Diaspora of the City*, particularly strong in the Prologue and Epilogue. "Imagine the city through the eyes of its founder. Imagine your name to be Byzas" (2018, p. vii) writes Örs, starting the book with an invitation to time travel. As she continues in the second-person narrative for the next 15 pages, the reader immediately becomes aware that this is a rather unique piece of academic writing, and the author will be speaking to the heart as much as to the mind. In the Prologue, Örs accomplishes the difficult task of summarizing Istanbul's history, from its establishment by Byzas, through the Ottoman Era, then on to the Turkish Republic, with an emphasis on the milestones for the Greek Orthodox population of the city. Halfway through the Prologue, she invites the reader to answer a question: "Imagine asking yourself: When they were living together happily for so long, how did the Greeks and Turks become enemies all of a sudden; really, why did the Greeks leave Istanbul?" (p. xiii). Örs continuously connects this question, both explicitly and implicitly, to her analyses of the Rum Polites community. At the end of the Prologue, she eloquently defines the space where the scholarly meets the personal, hinting at the basis of her work's authenticity:

Imagine being an Istanbulite in Athens, this time at the turn of the twenty-first century. You are a Turkish woman in Greece, trying to open your ears to both sides of the story in bilateral relations. Imagine you are an anthropology student from Harvard, trying to reconcile between your personal position and trends in the discipline, putting to the fore what the people you study are telling you. The

people you study come from the city that is your home. Hear them talk about their home, your shared place of longing. Listen to their parallel histories, broken pasts, changing perspectives. Meet the man who decides to tell his story to make a change; talk to the woman who is too bitter to talk. Feel the weight of what you learn, blend these things with what you know, compose stories, and write them down. Share the story of your fieldwork as made up from stories you were told. Always remember that there will be another story, many stories that compete, contrast, or overlap with the story you end up telling. Imagine the city, through the stories told about it. Enjoy the stories. (p. xxii)

Setting the stage for the stories in this way, Örs starts the first chapter with the tale that started it all for her: the day of her arrival in Athens. She is in Paleo Faliro, a neighborhood dominated by Constantinopolitan Greeks. As she walks around, she hears two men, members of this community, speaking in Turkish. The men behave in a welcoming manner when Örs tells them that she is from Istanbul, and after a little chat, they offer to connect her with other members of the community. This is how Örs decided to research this community for her dissertation.

This community is “referred to as Constantinopolitan Greeks in English, as *Konstantinoupolites* or *Polites* in Greek, and as *İstanbulu Rum* in Turkish” (p. 3). Örs prefers to call this community Rum Polites, as it “combines two of the most widely used emic terms of self-designation” (p. 4). Thus, she intends “to avoid confusion with other groups with similar names, to hint at their bilingual culture, and to acknowledge their self-emphasized identity as Istanbulites” (p. 4). She explains, “Rum is the Turkish word for Romios [used for the] ethno-religious category of the Greek Orthodox in Turkey, as well as the wider Middle East,” while Polites hints at “an attachment to an urban legacy as the word *Poli* means city as well as Istanbul, the City” (p. 4). Örs then explains who Rum Polites are: a diverse community, many of whom are in Athens while some are still in Istanbul, but also with members in different parts of the world (p. 4). Some of them have “Turkish citizenship, some Greek, some both” while “some are in-between, trying to cancel one and obtain the other” (p. 5). Many of them speak both Greek and Turkish, and while “their mother tongue is mostly the demotic Greek,” they use “a large vocabulary unknown to non-Istanbulites,” which makes some people regard it as “a different dialect or even a language called Politika or Romeika” (p. 5)

While Örs focuses mostly on Athens in her fieldwork, because this is where most of the Rum Polites live, she also connects with their home community in Istanbul (p. 19). Örs explains that her work is “categorized as urban anthropology not only because it was conducted in two cities with a focus on an urban community,” but more because she investigates how the city of Istanbul has become “the main point of reference in the identification of a dispersed community” (p. 20). In other words, the city has become “an object of ethnographic research” in the work (p. 20). The ethnographic fieldwork Örs conducted over the four years she lived in Athens is the primary research method of her work (p. 21). This fieldwork includes:

observance (engaged or noninvolved, focused or select, of people, objects, performances, events, surroundings, and appearances), conversing (informal, open-ended, semi-structured, descriptive, 'encounter,' focus group interviews, life stories, chitchat, gossip), participation (in events, meals, daily routines, cooking, presentations, performances, seminars, research groups, ceremonies, rituals), analyses (words, language, narratives, discourses, tales, myths, cookbooks, novels, biographies, memoirs, images, tastes, sounds, smells, statistics, surveys, membership records, poems, films, documentaries, newspapers, scholarly work, social networks)— and more. (p. 21)

Örs adds that her “interactions with informants ranging in age from 9 to 90 were conducted in durations varying from 10 minutes to over 10 years” (p. 21).

Such in-depth, long-term, and multi-layered fieldwork enables Örs to produce convincing and well-supported arguments throughout the book. Focusing on the everyday life experiences of Rum Polites in the book's second chapter, she explicates the cosmopolitan knowledge of Rum Polites, utilizing various concepts of Pierre Bourdieu. She observes the references to Istanbul in the everyday experiences of Rum Polites in Athens, the city which she describes as “another city to which they belong, one that is far in space and lost in time, one that lives in their memory through a continuously refreshed and delicately contested cosmopolitan knowledge” (p. 62). She finds that:

...cosmopolitan knowledge about Istanbul becomes a kind of cultural capital, a way of practicing distinction, through which the Rum Polites can identify each other as belonging to the City and reassure themselves in their identity of being Istanbulites, while at the same time underlining their differences from Athenians on an everyday basis. (p. 62)

In the third chapter of the book Örs analyses the specificities of Rum Polites over two central tenets: “exclusive diversity” and “ambiguity of being out of place” (pp. 67–122). As Örs develops her arguments on Rum Polites' cosmopolitanism, she is always aware of their diversity. She points out that Rum Polites community comprises great diversity, and in her conceptualization of Rum Polites as diaspora of the city, she emphasizes that this diversity “makes any attempt at categorizing them difficult” (p. 110). Örs explains that Rum Polites define and experience cosmopolitanism as a Constantinopolitan trait: “Cosmopolitanism is integral to their culture only insofar as it is perceived in the Constantinopolitan way” (p. 110).

Örs's arguments on the ambiguity of being out of place are also elaborately crafted. She explains that Rum Polites are categorized as a non-Muslim minority in Turkey, in line with the Treaty of Lausanne, and that the Turkish state has almost always “applied a policy of their exclusion” (p. 91). Meanwhile in Greece, “regardless of their legal citizenship status, Rum Polites were always included among the latter in the shifting distinction between *kseni* (outsiders, foreigners) and *dhiki mas* (our own)” (p. 91). Örs observes, “[They] cannot be fully

sorted with respect to either the Greek or the Turkish state,” as “many Rum Polites declare themselves to be more comfortable with displaying not a nationally but a culturally defined identity” (p. 95). She explains that the Greek nation-state sees them as a “diaspora community because it is assumed that the homeland of Greeks is (in) Greece,” hence when they are in Greece they are regarded as having “returned to their homeland” (p. 104). As Örs observes, however, “Rum Polites do not accept these categorizations, simply because they consider their homeland to be Istanbul—neither Greece, nor Turkey, nor Kath ’imas Anatoli” (p. 104). She concludes, “Those who live in Istanbul are at home, not in diaspora and not waiting to be redeemed” (p. 104). While “the terminology of return is very much embedded in the official and popular discourses in both Greece and Turkey” (p. 105), as Örs aptly observes, for Rum Polites, Istanbul is “the reference point of homeland,” in other words “their place of belonging.” Consequently, they “do not regard themselves to have returned home while in Athens” (p. 107). Anchoring her argument to the bonds Rum Polites have with the city enables Örs to illustrate the uniqueness of their situation. She explains that what makes Rum Polites’ experience diasporic is neither nation nor ethnicity but the city (110): “For the Rum Polites specifically, it is Istanbul, the City, which is the home of the Rum Polites, the foundation of their history, the source of their culture. Istanbul is the *raison d’être* of the Rum Polites” (110).

Thus, what makes İlay Romain Örs’s work such an original example of ethnographic studies is her achievement of locating the spatial at the center of her arguments, “recognizing the city as a basis for diaspora building, and by extension for identity construction” (p. 111). She therefore manages to find:

...new horizons in those branches of ethnographic studies that were thus far overshadowed by the predominance of Western value systems and the supremacy of the nation-state. The city enables a spatial shrinkage yet a conceptual enlargement by allowing linkages between diverse peoples and experiences, contradictions and complexities, ambiguities and multiplicities, which thus far were attempted to be sorted by the work of nationalism. (p. 111)

Observing this enables Örs to discover new routes as she navigates through her empiric material, for she develops her arguments free of “the bias of ethnic and religious continuity in the categories formed through a reference to the state” (p. 111). Consequently, referring to the realities of “exclusive diversity” and “ambiguity of being out of place,” Örs skillfully crystalizes her argument on Rum Polites’ cosmopolitanism:

Cosmopolitanism is not a challenge to their identity; it only strengthens their sense of belonging. They emerge as Polites, urbanites, etymologically urban, and exclusive in their diversity. As they are pushed out of their City, they retain their city identity, maintained and strengthened in memory, practiced by cosmopolitan knowledge in daily life. And they take their City with them wherever they go, building diasporas of the City. (p.111)

Örs addresses the question of why the Rums had to leave Istanbul, particularly in the fourth and fifth chapters of the book. In Chapter 4, titled “Resolutionary Recollections: Event, Memory, and Sharing the Suffering,” she analyzes the tragic events the Rums had endured in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Turkey, as well as the representations of these events in the cultural sphere. She explains that the current generation of Rum Polites remember the sudden drafting of non-Muslims after the start of WWII, despite Turkey not having joined the war. The Wealth Tax (1942) resulted in deep suffering for Turkey’s minority population, as it was implemented arbitrarily resulting in many minority families losing all their belongings; some of those who could not pay the tax were sent to a labor camp (p. 135). In the events of September 6-7 (*Septemvriana*) in 1955 after a provocation about an alleged attack on Atatürk’s house in Salonika (a fabricated story), within a couple of hours, “masses of people attacked and destroyed shops, businesses, houses, churches, schools, hospitals, cemeteries, and any other kind of property belonging to Rum Polites” (p. 136). Örs explains that, despite this tragedy, many Rum Polites stayed in the city to rebuild their lives (p. 137). However, over 20,000 Rum Polites had to leave when all Greek passport holders became “illegal residents, therefore working and owning property illegally” (p. 138) as a result of a law passed on March 16, 1964. They were “forced to abandon the country, their property, their business, their family, simply all their life in Istanbul” (p. 138). They were only allowed to take their non-valuables as they left; most of their businesses, wealth, and property were simply left to the Turkish state (p. 138). In the following decade, many members of the remaining Rum Polites community had to leave due to a rise of hatred as a result of the turmoil in Cyprus after 1974 (pp. 138–139). After giving an overview of certain films and television shows dealing with these traumatic events, Örs proceeds to discuss the effects these events had on “how the Rum Polites shape their identities and political orientation” (p. 147). In turn, she also tries to understand if “these identities and orientations affect the ways in which the Rum Polites deal with their suffering” (p. 147). In her ethnographic research, Örs observes that Rum Polites relate to their trauma in multiple ways, which demonstrates “there is no linear correspondence between the nature of individual experiences and how people choose to deal with them” (p. 149). She concludes, “It is rather the political stance or the social status of the actors that informs the way they posit themselves in relation to the traumatic events, and thereby to the Turks” (p. 149).

Örs delves deeper into the concept of cosmopolitanism in Chapter 5, titled “Capital of Memory: Cosmopolitanist Nostalgia in Istanbul.” Here, she first attracts attention to the idea of “the Istanbulite *belle époque*” as a period from the 1880s-1960s, which portrays an urban society of a “peaceful, respectful, civilized, multicultural coexistence” (p. 172). She observes how this idea is at the root of cosmopolitanist nostalgia, which she uses as a generic term “to denote the wide array of past-oriented discourses preoccupied with describing Istanbul as a cosmopolitan city” (p. 174). Örs attracts attention to Rum Polites as a main component of this nostalgic discourse:

Rum Polites play an important role in this nostalgic literature about the cosmopolitan old Istanbul. They usually feature the well-dressed madame, the polite monsieur, hatmakers, florists, patisserie owners, rich bankers, jewelers, friends, and neighbors who were good cooks and spoke Turkish fluently albeit with a charming accent—but this remains just about all of what the reader may find out about the Rum Polites of Istanbul. (p. 175)

Underscoring how “the public nostalgic discourses in Istanbul rarely specify what exactly they romanticize” (p. 177), they remain “apersonal and ahistorical” (p. 178). She takes the readers back to the very question she asked in the Prologue:

If, for example, there was such a recognized, celebrated, quintessentialized level of cosmopolitanism reigning in Istanbul until recently, how did it give rise to its own dissolution, to the tragic destruction of the very cosmopolitan order it endorsed? How within such a cosmopolitanist landscape could a pogrom like that of 6–7 September 1955 take place? How could large amounts of wealth be seized from minorities by the force of law? How could a campaign that promotes the sole use of the Turkish language in public prevail for years in the multilingual environment of cosmopolitan Istanbul? (p. 178)

Örs observes that the cosmopolitanist nostalgia leaves all these questions unanswered: “What happened to the Rum Polites and others who made the place so cosmopolitan remains mysterious to the bearers of nostalgia. It is as if one day people saw that the Rum shops and patisseries were closed down” (p. 178). In this chapter, Örs also analyzes “how the Rum Polites write about themselves as Rum Polites,” because she wants to understand “the ways in which the Rum Polites express themselves, remember their past, relate their experiences to others, articulate their sense of being, and conceptualize their identity through the written word” (p. 189). The answers to the questions she asks in this context demonstrate that “the City is romanticized and abstracted in memory and in the Rum Polites literature; the image of a cosmopolitan Istanbul distant in time and space becomes the necessary basis for the perpetuation of a cultural identity in diaspora” (p. 194). This conclusion is entirely in line with the findings in the earlier chapters of the book with regard to the Rum Polites’ identity based on the City and their cosmopolitan knowledge.

One particular strength of Örs’s book is her accomplished demonstration “of emic conceptions of cosmopolitanism” through her ethnographic research. She achieves this through the interaction of multiple layers of her analysis. She articulately employs Pierre Bourdieu’s theories and illustrates the “everyday experience of cosmopolitanism, with a sense of distinction based on the urban cultural capital of cosmopolitan knowledge” (p. 219). In addition to that, she makes a solid argument about exclusive diversity, where she reveals, “community boundaries (are drawn) not so much along primordial lines but on a sense of commitment to the urban cosmopolitan culture of Istanbul” (p. 219). Consequently, she brings a unique perspective on her subject matter as she observes that:

...each locality contributes with its own version of Istanbul cosmopolitanism: be it the conservative, status quo, imperial cosmopolitanism of Fanar or the civil, pluralistic, open, visible sharing of a bourgeois public space by institutionally autonomous and privately separate 'others' in Pera or the delineation of self-contained middle working class cultural existences in Tatavla that code Istanbul as a cosmopolitan city, these neighborhood- and experience-based intricacies give much-needed explicitness to an otherwise non-referential notion of cosmopolitanism. (p. 220)

Her ethnographic research and in-depth theoretic arguments enable Örs to achieve what she intends: "to bring out the diversity of meanings associated with the concept of cosmopolitanism from the looking glass of communities who define themselves as cosmopolitan, and participate in the cosmopolitan diversity in the societies where they live" (p. 220). She does this in the best possible manner in the context of the displaced Greek Orthodox community of Istanbul, and her book would certainly be an invaluable guide for ethnographic studies in communities similar to Rum Polites.