

An Analysis of Validebağ Grove from the Lens of Urban Political Ecology¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts the critical lens of UPE, short for Urban Political Ecology, to examine the socio-political underpinnings of public green space in the 21st-century neoliberal urban regime, particularly focusing on Istanbul's historic Validebağ Grove. Conducting a historical analysis, this study elucidates how Validebağ's socio-nature has been reshaped over time amidst the evolving political and economic forces, with a particular focus on the aftermath of the 1980's, since when neoliberal urban policies have been hegemonic in the spatial governance of Istanbul. We show the marginalization of Validebağ's use-value following the military rule of 1980, the commercialization of its socio-nature through deregulation and re-regulation, and the grove's instrumentalization for urban capitalist growth through park projects proposed by the local municipality. We demonstrate how the "ideology of nature" and its "technocratic" management are instrumental in employing urban green as a capital accumulation strategy within the 21st neoliberal urban governance.

Key Words: Urban Groves, Urban Public Green, Urban Political Ecology, Ideology of Nature, Validebağ Grove, Neoliberal Urban Policies.

Validebağ Korusunun Kentsel Politik Ekoloji Perspektifinden Analizi

ÖZET

Bu makale, İstanbul'un tarihi Validebağ Korusu'na odaklanarak, 21. yüzyıl neoliberal kentsel rejiminde kamusal yeşil alanın sosyo-politik temellerini kentsel politik ekolojinin (KPE) eleştirel bakış açısını benimseyerek inceler. Tarihsel bir analiz yaparak, Validebağ'ın toplumsal doğasının zaman içinde dönüşen siyasi ve ekonomik güçlerle birlikte nasıl şekillendiğini, özellikle neoliberal kentsel politikaların İstanbul'un mekansal yönetiminde egemen olduğu 1980'lerin sonrasına odaklanarak aydınlatır. Çalışmada, 1980 askeri darbesinin ardından Validebağ'ın kullanım değerinin marjinalleştirildiğini, toplumsal doğasının kuralsızlaştırma ve yeniden kurallaştırma yoluyla ticarileştirildiğini ve yerel belediye tarafından önerilen park projeleri aracılığıyla kentin kapitalist büyümesi için araçsallaştırıldığını gösteriyoruz. 21. yüzyılın neoliberal kentsel yönetiminde kent

¹This paper is based on the PhD Dissertation, entitled "The Significance of Validebağ Grove in the Urban History of Istanbul", conducted by Ayşegül Boyalı, with the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ayşegül Baykan.

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yeşilin sermaye birikimi stratejisi olarak kullanılmasında, "doğa ideolojisi" ve onun "teknokratik yönetimin" nasıl etkili olduğunu gösteriyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kent Koruları, Kamusal Kent Yeşili, Kentsel Politik Ekoloji, Doğa İdeolojisi, Validebağ Korusu, Neoliberal Kent Politikaları.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, greening of cities is considered as one of the major indicators for urban sustainability and is privileged in urban policies, through the planting of street trees, building community gardens, neighborhood parks, or even generating vegetation of green roofs to restoration of historic parks and gardens, and the development of complex forestry programs and green infrastructure. Such greening projects can be done in the name of improving air quality, social mixing and recreation, urban beautification, or wildlife protection. However, greening projects as a form of spatial governance that overlooks the prevailing social dynamics of space could mask the historically constituted power relations that produce nature significantly for urban capitalist growth. As any other form of urban green, urban groves are not a natural occurrence, or a sum of its trees but products of a socio-physical process infused with political, economic, and cultural forces (Perkins, 2015). Or they are, what Erik Swyngedouw (1999) describes as "socio-natural objects," which encapsulate a complex web of historical and geographical relations (Swyngedouw, 1999, 445). In that sense, historical studies are needed to reveal the context-specific power dynamics beneath greening projects (Kitchen, 2012).

In this study, we inquire this debate through the analysis of Istanbul's historic Validebağ Grove and examine the neo-liberalization of its 'socio-nature', in the aftermath of 1980's. By offering a case study, in the body of the Validebağ Grove, to exemplify the transforming landscapes of historic groves in Istanbul, we hope to contribute to the flourishing studies of urban political ecology on urban green spaces in Turkey that critically interrogate the social forces structuring urban parks and gardens within neoliberal regime of cities (Akbulut 2014, Erensü and Kahraman 2016, Genoud 2018, İncekaş 2021). For this aim, we follow the Urban Political Ecology (UPE) perspective to go beyond the assumed dichotomy between nature versus the social realms, as we attempt to examine the historical emergence and socio-natural transformation of the Validebağ Grove from the 19th century to the present.

2. PROBLEMATIZING THE DUALIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL REALMS AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Before we offer the findings on and the analysis of the Validebağ Grove, it is essential that we first present the UPE perspective, as it frames the theoretical approach of this study and informs the conclusions reached.

Starting from the 18th century, under the sway of Enlightenment ideals and the Romantic movement, the notion of nature underwent a significant transformation. Namely, it evolved to signify "the material world itself" (Raymond Williams, 2008, 209) and "contrasted with what had been made of man, or what man had made of himself" (210). It began to evoke images of "countryside, the unspoiled places, plants and creatures other than man" (211), embodying entities untouched by human influence and social relations. Neil Smith (2008) directly addresses the development of capitalist modes of production during the 19th century, emphasizing the relations of social production that delineate the natural realm from the social one. Accordingly, the separation of the two realms serves an ideological function, that he calls the "ideology of nature", which formulates nature as "external" and "universal": whereby nature's "externality" implies a disconnect from human labor and social constructs, portraying it as "pristine, God-given, autonomous," and akin to raw material. The "universal" conceptualization suggests unalterable, innate laws, framing existing social relations as "natural" and disregarding historical contingencies. Consequently, this perspective neutralizes the impacts of capitalist production, framing them as "inevitable" (Smith, 2008, p. 11-2). According to Smith, the central concern is not merely about "human domination over nature" or its destruction, but rather about understanding "the production of nature." The ideology of nature obscures the fact that capitalism's goal is "to produce nature", serving as an accumulation strategy.

"Under dictate from the accumulation process, capitalism as a mode of production must expand continuously if it is to survive. The reproduction of material life is wholly dependent on the production and reproduction of surplus value. To this end, capital stalks the earth in search of material resources; nature becomes a universal means of production in the sense that it not only provides the subjects, objects, and instruments of production, but is also in its totality an appendage to the production process." (Smith, 2008, p. 71).

Urban political ecology (UPE) deploys this perspective, understanding nature as socially produced, shaped by political and economic imperatives and cultural ideologies. UPE challenges the dichotomous views of "nature vs. society," "city vs. environment," "urban vs. nature," and "built environment vs. natural environment," revealing them as products of social constructions. To emphasize this view, Noel Castree (2001) contends that such dualities serve as "instruments of domination." Consequently, UPE critiques both the "technocratic" approach, which seeks to manage the environment as raw material for policy-driven solutions, and the "ecocentric" perspective, which idealizes returning to a pristine notion of nature untouched by human intervention. Castree argues that both overlook the fact that "the physical characteristics of nature are contingent upon social practices: they are not fixed" (2001, p. 13).

However, Castree also emphasizes that recognizing nature as socially produced doesn't imply that it is solely an extension of the social; "not a tabula rasa on which societies can write at will" (2001, 17). Instead, it is to claim that "cities are built out of natural resources, through socially mediated natural processes" and they are "specific historical results of

socio-environmental processes", and "the environment of the city (both social and physical) is the result of a historical-geographical process of the urbanization of nature" (Heynen, Kaika, Swyngedouw, 2006, p. 3-5). Therefore, focusing on the question of power in socio-environment relations, UPE asks, "who defines nature," "for whose benefit," and "at the expense of what" (Castree, 2001).

Urban political ecology investigates the "capitalist social relations," "the metabolic production of use values operat(ing) in and through specific social relations of control, ownership, and appropriation, and in the context of the mobilization of both (sometimes already metabolized) nature and labor to produce commodities (as forms of metabolized socio-natures) with an eye towards the realization of the embodied exchange value" (Heynen, Kaika, Swyngedouw 2006, p. 7). It asks for whose favor the distribution of natural resources occurs. It points out that knowledge of environmental data from production to circulation is ideological and presents the interest of the upper class as the interest of all. Simultaneously, UPE critically evaluates the validity of truth claims and discourses surrounding environmental knowledge. It examines how environmental issues are framed, proposed, and endowed with significance by diverse social actors, dismantling competing narratives to expose underlying socio-environmental agendas (Castree, 2001, p. 13). This process involves "de-naturalizing" environmental discourses by subjecting them to critical scrutiny, revealing the socio-political goals they serve.

In this context, when analyzing Validebağ, we perceive urban green area as a product of social relations and as shaped continuously by a complex interplay of political and economic dynamics. In that sense, urban green stands as a contested space, subject to struggles over its meaning, form, and function among diverse social groups. Through this lens, we examine the urbanization of Validebağ's socio-nature, with a particular emphasis on the post-1980 era. We start by exploring its historical origins and evolution, tracing its development across changing political regimes from the late Ottoman period to Republican Turkey. Subsequently, we illustrate how Istanbul's integration into the global market has reshaped the city's urban green spaces, with specific attention to Validebağ's landscape. We inquire into the challenges posed by globalization to Validebağ and investigate how the aftermath of neoliberal urban policies has impacted the existing socio-environmental relations within the area.

3. THE VALIDEBAĞ GROVE: A CASE STUDY

Validebağ, situated in Istanbul's Üsküdar's Altunizade district, stands as a prominent public grove located amidst the Altunizade, Koşuyolu, Acıbadem, and Barbaros neighborhoods. It ranks as the second-largest green space open to the public in the Anatolian part of the city and holds the status of Grade One natural site. Within the expanse of Validebağ Grove lies a variety of facilities including a teacher's eventide home, teacher's cultural lodge, cafeterias, teacher's guest house, a hostel, a hospital, and two high schools, namely the Haydarpaşa Lycee and the Validebağ Science Lycee. Additionally, it houses a scout house

and the University of Health Sciences Experimental Medicine Research Center beneath the historical landmarks of the Abdülaziz Hunting Lodge and Adile Sultan Pavilion (Figure 1). With a recorded total area of 354,076 square meters in the land registry, ownership of Validebağ Grove belongs to the General Directorate of National Real Estate, affiliated with the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. Validebağ Grove is divided among various entities for specific purposes, including The Ministry of Health (17,729 square meters) and the Ministry of National Education (75,347 square meters), while the remaining area of 261,000 square meters is allocated to the Üsküdar Municipality. Validebağ Grove was fully recorded as Grade One natural site area by the decision of Istanbul Cultural and Natural Heritage Preservation Board No. III in 1999, upon the endeavors of neighborhood residents and of the grassroots organization Validebağ Volunteers during their struggles to protect the area and its ecological value.

Figure 1. Validebağ Grove.



- A) Haydarpaşa Lycee
- B) Scout House (former barns-today use as cafeteria)
- C) Soccer field
- D) Abdülaziz Hunting Lodge
- E) Teacher's eventide home (former preventorium)
- F) car park
- G) Adile Sultan Pavilion Teacher's Lodge
- H) Research Laboratory (former sanatorium)
- I) Validebağ Sciebbe Lycee
- J) Validebağ Hospital Additional Service Building
- K) Hospital Carpark
- L) Teacher's Guest House
- M) Valide Cafe (former solarium)
- N) Hotel (former children preventorium)
- O) Housing mansions at the grove's border erected in the aftermath of 1980's
- P) water gaze
- R) prefabricated cafeterias

Source: Authors

Validebağ holds not only natural but also historical significance in the urban history of Istanbul, reflective of the shifting political and economic forces and cultural ideologies. Originally established as a pleasure garden for the ruling elite during the late Ottoman era, after the establishment of the Republic in 1923 it was repurposed to accommodate students from low-income families and teachers who were suffering from tuberculosis. However, the landscape of Validebağ underwent a radical transformation following the implementations of the January 24, 1980 policy decisions aimed at liberalizing the economy and the September 12, 1980 military coup d'état, and also throughout the 1990's with the growing power of local municipalities on urban space. This period witnessed Istanbul's integration into the global market, leading to the privatization of public lands and

the initiation of fencing around urban green spaces to facilitate urban growth. This shift in Istanbul's urban policies transformed Validebağ's landscape.

In short, the production of Validebağ's socio-nature in the aftermath of 1980 can be interpreted as a transition from its use value for citizens' health to means for generating capitalist exchange value. This neoliberal agenda does not only commercialize Validebağ but also reproduces it in a way to assist wider capitalist urban growth. In other words, this study aims to demonstrate how the intertwining of the "ideology of nature," "technocratic" strategies, and the "deregulation and reregulation of state power" goes in tandem with the demands of capital and facilitates the incorporation of urban public green spaces into the framework of urban capitalist expansion, hence transforming them into abstract spaces.

The aim of the demonstration presented below is to offer an historical and qualitative data and analysis to understand the changes manifested in the urban environment of Istanbul, along with shifting political and economic structures, through the lens of the UPE, whose key premise is a critic of the society-nature dialectic (Neuman 2009, Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2019). Historical analysis enables us both to unmask socially produced power relations that make and remake landscapes, which are packaged in a commodity form in neoliberal cities, paying tribute to the material and discursive elements.

Our methodology draws upon both archival and ethnographic work. Extensive archival research took place, namely through a survey of the newspapers *Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet*, state archives, and the grey literature covering the grassroots activists' magazine "Validebağ Post" (published until 2009) and Validebağ Grove Online Seminar Series Summary Report (published in 2021). To support the archival data, field visits and semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 subjects. These participants were connected to different problematics of the research, such as the historical uses of the facilities and were the employees of extinct facilities (the health center). Also included, were members of the long-term everyday users of the Validebağ and the neighborhood residents who witnessed its transformation, grassroots activists, the current Validebağ staff and new visitors. Within the scope of this article, due to limited space, we have focused on the transformation of Validebağ's socio-nature along with the economic and political forces. The grassroots struggles over Validebağ or how everyday users experience its transforming landscape are findings to be offered at a more extended sphere of work. Rather, we attempt to show here the intricate faces of how social production of nature takes place in urban green today. Therefore, field interviews referenced here are those that we see as specifically relevant to the problematic presented.

The need to limit the writing to the problematic at hand, namely, to the socio-nature of the Grove's articulation to the demands of capital and the dualism between nature versus the social realms, we followed a thematic perspective, rather than a chronological narrative. For this end, analytical concepts of UPE were applied to the historical analysis of Validebağ. In this regard, we aimed to show how the meaning of Validebağ shifted along with World War I (1914-1918) and during the changing political regimes, from the late

Ottoman rule to the founding of the Republic. We, then proceeded to analyze how the 1980 coup d'état and Istanbul's integration to the global market transformed Validebağ's socio-nature. In sum, we aimed to demonstrate how: 1) the ideology of nature marginalized use-value in the grove following the military rule of the 1980 coup d'état, 2) grove's socio-nature was commercialized through deregulation and reregulation with a technocratic outlook, 3) Validebağ's greenery turned into a backyard for the surrounding housing sites and was utilized to increase real-estate values and urban capitalist growth, and finally how; 4) park projects attempted to produce Validebağ's socio-nature as a kind of an abstract space, driving a wedge between nature and everyday life of inhabitants. The data to support these claims have come in large extent from historical survey of written documents and in part from the ethnographic interviews.

4. THE MAKING OF VALİDEBAĞ: FROM A LANDSCAPE FOR THE RULING ELITE TO A LANDSCAPE FOR THE NEEDY

Validebağ originated as a pleasure retreat for the ruling elite during the 19th century Ottoman era, serving as a summer residence for female sultanas. Reflecting broader efforts at modernization and the imperial family's desire to assert political influence through gardens and architectural landmarks in the city, it was established as a walled garden, complete with a pavilion and hunting lodge, nestled in the slopes of Istanbul's Çamlıca region. Bezm-i Alem Valide Sultana (1807-1853) played a pivotal role in its development, expanding it into a sprawling garden adorned with orchards and vineyards. With the expertise of European-educated gardener Zakaryan Efendi and Hekimbaşı Salih, who introduced grafting techniques from saplings sourced worldwide, Validebağ flourished (Turgut, 2004; Memiş and Kolay, 2017). The garden initially served utilitarian purposes, prioritizing productivity over aesthetic considerations in line with classical Ottoman tradition. The surplus produce was a source of income for the sultans in Ottoman royal gardens. However, as the process of modernization and Westernization unfolded, there emerged a growing emphasis on formal elements and aesthetically pleasing structures within royal gardens. Despite this prevalent tendency, Validebağ still held a utilitarian ethos with its vineyards, orchards and non-formal structures.

The Balkan Wars (1912-1923), followed by the First World War (WW1) (1914-1918) and the subsequent establishment of the Republic of Turkey (1923), introduced a new chapter in Validebağ's history, reshaping its socio-spatial dynamics and replacing the preferences of the ruling elite with those of the modernizing nation-state. In the aftermath of these long-lasting wars and the resulting population crisis, Sultan Vahdettin (1861-1926) in 1919 allocated Validebağ to orphaned female children, renaming it as the "Validebağ Daru'l-eytam/ Industrial School for Female Children". Until 1926, this institution provided industrial and agrarian education to its students. Following the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Validebağ underwent further transformations. In 1926, it became a city-boarding school for disadvantaged children, evolving into the "Validebağ Preventorium and Sanatorium Center" in 1927. Until the mid-1970s, under the auspices of the Ministry

of Education, it catered to children and teachers suffering from tuberculosis. To settle the new political regime with a modernist and positivist path, raising robust generations with a particular focus on childcare by state elite became a matter of social policy for fixing the population problem and crafting the new citizens for the newly constituted Republic (Rasimoğlu, 2017, p. 212). During this period, Validebağ served as a crucial site where students from low-income families and teachers received healthcare with state support in the context of a protectionist state economy (Figure 2). Despite the transition in political regimes, viticultural production persisted alongside extensive vegetable gardens and dairy farms, providing sustenance for the hospital's inhabitants and operating through a revolving fund until the 1980s (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Children Taking Basic Classes at the garden.



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Source: Ethem Durmuş Archive.

Figure 3. Vegetable Yards.



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Source: Ethem Durmuş Archive.

After the end of preventorium services in mid-1970's, a hospital for teachers was constructed in 1973 in the area, and a Vocational School of Health was opened in 1975 by way of restoring the historical barns within the premises. In 1975, Validebağ's Adile Sultan Pavilion was used as a set for the famous Turkish film series *Hababam Sınıfı* (The Chaos Class). In 1979, Mustafa Necati preventorium was transformed to an eventide's home for teachers. In 1992, the historic pavilion was further restored and transformed to function as a Teacher's Lodge and a Cultural Center.

5. URBANIZATION TRENDS OF ISTANBUL IN THE AFTERMATH OF 1980'S AND THE TRANSFORMING SOCIO-NATURE OF VALİDEBAĞ

The 1980 coup d'état stands as a pivotal moment in Turkish history, marking a period of political repression and the erosion of democratic participatory mechanisms alongside the implementation of liberal economic policies. It is a "fracture in Turkish history", hastening the fragmentation of space and diminishing its significance as a hub for civic engagement (Baykan and Hatuka, 2010). The subsequent urbanization patterns of Istanbul were deeply influenced by these developments. The city's integration into the global market, driven by neoliberal urban policies, facilitated what has been termed the "marketing of Istanbul" (Keyder, 2010). This endeavor involved the reconfiguration of the city and its built environment to fit a global image of gentility, aimed at attracting international investments and promoting the city's real estate. This transformation included the gentrification of neighborhoods, the commercialization of historic sites, and the conversion of city centers into spaces of spectacle. It also entailed the commodification of urban commons and natural resources to generate economic value, often at the expense of their socio-ecological significance (Aykan, 2014). As local and city governments gained increased power, particularly since the mid-1990s, there was a notable acceleration in the commercialization of public land, with less regard for public interests and the creation of livable environments. This shift in perspective has seen nature increasingly viewed not as a "common property of all" (Pérouse, 2014, p. 239) but rather as an economic asset to be exploited and marketed (Akbulut and Bartu Candan, 2014).

Since the 2000s, urban expansion, characterized by a construction boom, has become almost synonymous with notions of "modernity" and "development" (Erensü and Karaman, 2017, p. 24). Criticism or resistance against such development projects has often been marginalized as hindrances to the country's economic progress and international standing (Aykan, 2014, p. 258). This trend was further reinforced by the renaming of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing as the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning in 2011, and subsequently as the "Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change" in 2021. This shift centralized the management of protected areas with cultural and natural significance under the ministry's control, leading to concerns over possible destruction for construction purposes (Gürcan and Peter, 2015). The commercialization of Istanbul's invaluable natural, historical, aesthetic, and cultural assets, coupled with unequal resource

distribution, has resulted in the transformation of Istanbul into a metropolis marked by profound social segregation (Ünalın, 2014).

The shift in Istanbul's urban policies precipitated a transformation in Validebağ's landscape as well. The production of Validebağ's socio-nature following the 1980 coup d'état can be seen as a shift from sustaining the health and interests of local population to prioritizing the generation of exchange value for capital. Both the interventions of military rule in the 1980s and the subsequent actions of the local municipality, empowered by increased spatial governance authority since the 1990s, treated Validebağ as raw material—an empty land devoid of its historically entrenched social relations. This period saw the spatial governance of Validebağ's socio-nature marked by neglect of existing gardens, the dysfunction of established institutions, unauthorized commercialization of certain zones, encroachment of residential constructions upon the grove's borders, thus relegating it to a mere "backyard" for adjacent mansions, top-down park plans.

5.1. Ideology of Nature and Marginalization of the Use-value

Following the 1980 coup d'état, the military rule marginalized and abandoned the use-value through the cancelation of a revolving fund, generated by agricultural production and animal husbandry, and destroyed the dairy farms and vegetable yards in Validebağ that provided food provisions for patients and the hospital staff. Similarly, mirroring the general decline of Istanbul's bostans (historic urban market gardens dating back to the Byzantine period), urban agricultural production in Validebağ was cleansed from its landscape. The Chief Physician in Validebağ, Ethem Durmuş, questioned the feasibility of agriculture within the city with emphasis: "Can there be agriculture in the middle of the city at all?" (Memiş and Kolay, 2017). His comments portrayed the way in which urban green space became disconnected from work, downplaying its utilitarian value and contributing to the erosion of its practical usefulness. Subsequently, the maintenance of the gardens and orchards was neglected, leading to their deterioration. One informant, Suna, who was initially a student at school of nursing in 1974 and then worked as a nurse at Validebağ's hospital until 1994, explains this transformation she witnessed as follows: "Let's say it, in the '80s, a chief military doctor came, and at that time, that chief doctor disrupted everything there. He said, 'Is this place making a profit or a loss? Is it going into someone's pocket?' I don't know all about those financial accusations. Everyone was upset about this. But in the end, it was lost. I think his name was Mr. Erdoğan; he was a urologist. He acted tense and angry towards everything, towards everyone. I was a surgical nurse at that time. He was a military doctor. We went through a pressured period then. That's when it got disrupted."

Researcher: "After the '80s?"

Suna: "Things started to change afterward. When the revolving fund was gone, everyone was upset. Those places were left empty. It felt like a waste. For example, the hospital food was very good. There was a lot of interest in the food. The meals were served like in a

restaurant. It was surprising; they even served fish. I really ate the best meals there. The *pilav* (rice) was famous. They used to call it Validebağ's *pilav* (rice), nothing else."

Similarly, another informant, Ceyda, who was a student at the school of nursing in 1984 elaborated on the period after the 1980 Coup D'état: "There was no farm, and there were no vineyards left. The orchards were in disuse by the time we went there. Previously, it was a vineyard area, during the revolving fund period, they used to plant, harvest, and sell the surplus. They produced all the fruits, milk, and eggs themselves. They sold the surplus."

Moreover, the existing institutions in Validebağ providing health services and education have been rendered dysfunctional which can be interpreted as another strategy to weaken the use-value of the space: In 1991, there was an attempt to transfer the administration of Validebağ Teachers Hospital to Marmara University, but the decision was canceled following strong protests (Cumhuriyet 1991). Nevertheless, Validebağ Teacher's Hospital was eventually transferred to the Social Insurance Institution (Cumhuriyet, 30 July 2003) and in 2009 existing patients were evacuated. This again led to protests by the health and educational laborers in Validebağ who approached the grove through the symbolic and historic value of the space with which they felt a sense of belonging and considered as a gift to them by the Republican regime (Cumhuriyet, 16 July 2009) (Cumhuriyet, 28 August 2009), (Cumhuriyet, 9 February 2010).

5.2. Commercialization of Grove's Socio-Nature: Validebağ under "Construction"

Noel Castree (2008) argues that the neoliberalization of nature is characterized by a "technocratic outlook," which involves shaping natural landscapes through managerial approaches and leveraging nature for entrepreneurial purposes. Within this framework, the privatization of nature occurs through "the assignment of clear private property rights to social or environmental phenomena that were previously state-owned, unowned, or communally owned." (p. 142). Castree describes this process as encompassing mechanisms of deregulation, whereby the state reduces its safeguard in maintaining social and environmental realms through minimal regulation with a "light touch." Subsequently, there is a phase of reregulation, marked by the return of state intervention and the implementation of policies aimed at promoting privatization and expanding market influence into broader domains of social and environmental realms for the sake of economic benefit.

This framework also applies to Validebağ in the aftermath of the 1980's. While the entire grove was not fully privatized, the fragmentation of its integrity occurred through allocating some of its zones to other institutions, the opening of certain zones for construction, which were then commercialized, effectively privatizing its natural spaces to sell. In 1986, the then Minister of National Education authorized the allocation of a portion of Validebağ Grove that had been a natural habitat of visiting storks to Marmara University. Similarly, in 1992, the allocation of 50,000 square meters to Marmara University was approved, but attempts by Üsküdar Local Municipality to construct a restaurant with a pool and a

children's park in this area were thwarted by civil resistance⁵. (Validebağ Grove Online Seminar Series Summary Report, May 2021). In 1998, the plan of Marmara University to construct a cardiovascular hospital was approved, but civilian resistance prevented the construction.

Further, the Grove became susceptible to construction projects, coupled with unauthorized top-down interventions by the local government in the absence of state protection. While some construction endeavors were stopped by residents of the neighborhood, others were pursued despite legal proceedings and stay of execution decisions. Haydarpaşa Lycee (1990) and the scout house (1998) were erected on land formerly occupied by dairy farms and barns, which held significance as part of Validebağ's cultural heritage. In 1999, Haydarpaşa High School excavated an area equivalent to the size of a football field, leading to the destruction of natural vegetation (Cumhuriyet, January 8, 1999). Additionally, a plan for road construction was made but then abandoned due to a signature campaign organized by local communities and the teachers' union. Despite the neighborhood's application to the Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation Board to designate Validebağ as a natural heritage site and the Board's decision to halt all construction during the evaluation process, a tea garden was illicitly erected near the scout house in May 1999. Furthermore, in June 1999, large stones were placed on the left side of the main entrance of Adile Sultan Pavilion. In 2005, large holes were dug for the lighting poles and bulldozers were brought into the grove. (Validebağ Post May 2005).

Despite earning a designation of grade-one natural conservation area in 1999 through the efforts of local residents and educators safeguarding the grove, unauthorized actions by the local government have unfolded since 2006. While Validebağ Grove was allocated to the Ministry of Education in 1925 (owned by the treasury), and the Directorate General of National Real Estate under the Ministry of Finance allocated the entire Validebağ Grove to the Ministry of Education in 1957, the Provincial Director of National Education and Üsküdar Municipality signed a secret protocol, transferring the grove to the local municipality purportedly for "park restoration" and for providing cleaning, maintenance, and security services in 2006. Following a lawsuit filed by the Validebağ Volunteers against the protocol, the Council of State annulled the protocol in 2011. In 2014, a large part of the Grove was temporarily allocated to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) for a park project. In 2020, following the change in the administration of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the Grove was reallocated to the Üsküdar Municipality by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization⁶.

The growing power of local and metropolitan municipalities on the Grove in the mentioned years led to a series of construction activities aimed at facilitating commercial

⁵This resistance involved setting up tents in the area and lasted for days, halting the municipality's plans.

⁶Aside from the 17,729 square meters allocated to the Ministry of Health and the 75,347 square meters allocated to the Ministry of Education, the remaining 261,000 square meters were allocated to the Üsküdar Municipality on March 26, 2020.

endeavors, disregarding the conservation efforts. During this restoration period, significant alterations occurred. Historical stone walls lining Tophanelioğlu Avenue were demolished, replaced by concrete ones. In 2007, a 100-meter-long and 6-meter-wide road was constructed (Cumhuriyet, 2007), followed by the establishment of a racecourse track in 2009. In the name of maintenance, trees were cut down and many creatures in the ecosystem passed away (Validebağ Post, January 2009). Additionally, tea gardens encircling the Adile Sultan Pavilion were erected. The area around the historic pavilion was transformed with marble flooring, chairs, and tables, converting it into a restaurant, enclosing the pavilion's front garden. These developments were carried out without the necessary approval from the preservation board and fenced the existing picnic areas. The introduction of these commercial elements disrupted the unmediated connection between users and the environment, who were picnicking in the area, and shifted the focus towards consumption rather than appreciation of nature's use value (Figure 4). For example, turning one of the rooms of Adile Sultan Pavilion to *Hababam Sınıfı* (The Chaos Class) Muesum in 2015 reduced the rich history of space to the popular film, thus repacking it as a spectacle place, without a reference to the preventorium period, causing a gap in public memory. Not only the long-term users, but also new visitors who visit the space are alienated when they compare the current landscape of the front and back gardens of Adile Sultan Pavilion with the one they saw in the *Hababam Sınıfı* (The Chaos Class)⁷. Nur and Zehra, visiting the Validebağ Grove, presently all structured and concretized, to see the The Chaos Class Museum, were surprised that Validebağ had been a grove before hand:

Nur: "For example, the front of the *Hababam Sınıfı* has all these ruined marble pieces. It would have been more natural if it were just soil. It's not at all like this in the movie."

Zehra: "We only went into the museum and took a look. But it wasn't what I expected. They made the statues out of cardboard or something. The front of the school is also very different. It wasn't concrete; it was soil in the movie. It doesn't reflect its historical texture."

⁷The film was shot in the historic Adile Sultan Pavilion in 1975.

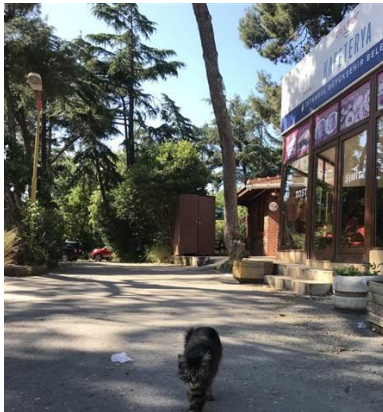
Figure 4. Front garden of Adile Sultan Pavilion, marbled and fenced in the restoration period.



Source: Photograph taken by Ayşegül Boyalı

Further attempts at construction for commercial purposes, such as expanding the carpark in 2014 (Cumhuriyet, 18 August 2014) and establishing "boutique" cafeterias in 2016 (Cumhuriyet, 14 December 2016), were undertaken without the necessary approval from the conservation board (Figure 5). However, these interventions, including the use of earth-moving machines by the local government, were met with resistance from environmental grassroots initiatives, the teachers' union, and local communities. Finally, in 2021, Üsküdar Municipality took drastic action by dumping sand and debris into Validebağ during the overnight hours, on the 21st of September. This egregious act prompted activists to embark on a watch that lasted over 500 days.

Figure 5. One of the Cafeterias constructed without approval from the Preservation Board.



Source: Photograph taken by Ayşegül Boyalı

Currently, the Abdülaziz Hunting Lodge is exclusively utilized for photo shoots upon rental, with no other public access permitted. Similarly, Adile Sultan Pavilion is rented out for wedding receptions, photo shoots, and restaurant services. Furthermore, the establishment of the Hababam Class Museum on the first floor of the pavilion means that everyday visitors no longer have unrestricted access to tour the entire palace without paying a fee. In contrast, the historical Adile Sultan Pavilion, initially repurposed as a Teacher's Lodge and Cultural Center in 1992, served as an active hub for teachers engaging in cultural activities such as choir rehearsals, seminars, etc. However, from the early 2000s onward, there has been a noticeable shift towards commercialization at the Adile Sultan Pavilion Teacher's Lodge as well, prioritizing its use as a restaurant rather than a cultural center. Cem, who has been working as a waiter in the pavilion since 1990's, explained this shift:

“This wasn't just a teachers' lodge, pay attention. Actually, it was a cultural center. It had a cultural dimension. There was a polyphonic choir. There were 10-15 different activities... Every July, there would be a festival conducted by teachers, and the choir members would give concerts. Seminars were held, there were the theater, cinema, and choir activities... Being a cultural center meant it was a place for teachers to improve themselves. Social activities... There were cinema, theater, and seminar sessions, along with psychology classes. Esteemed old writers would come and hold discussions. At that time, it wasn't just a teachers' house; it was a teachers' lodge and cultural center.”

5.3. Validebağ's Becoming a Backyard for Mushrooming Housing Sites: Rising Real-Estate Values Through Selling of 'Pristine' Nature

The Koşuyolu settlement neighboring Validebağ was developed in 1950's as an inexpensive social housing project. However, globalization of later decades posed challenges to the sustainable development of the district (Yıldız, 2015, p. 55). While the district was known with the garden-house movement, a rural lifestyle, and close neighborhood relations in 1950s, various factors came about there-after. Consumption patterns changed during the 1960's, the new Bosphorus bridge was introduced in 1973 a new resident profile of the increasing number of mass high-rise buildings emerged with a rising population density, the invasion of commercial firms and consumption places such as cafes and restaurants spread out. This transformation resulted in the gentrification of the neighborhood, in tandem with an emerging upper-class taste (Yıldız, 2015). Hence, the Validebağ Grove, which had been framed by a small number of garden houses, orchards, dairy farms and wooded areas before the 1970s, following the 1980's, has been under siege by mushrooming residences and housing sites⁸. The politically repressive period of the martial rule opened the way for bordering neighborhoods of Validebağ to become economically profitable spaces by giving permission to the construction of housing sites with the destruction of dairy farms, orchards and vineyards existing in these surrounding

⁸ See Figure 1

neighborhoods. The establishment of “Validebağ Sitesi” (or “Levazım Sitesi” as the former name of the housing site) bordering the grove by the intervention of military rule was one of the phenomena, engrained in the memory of the long-time inhabitants. For them, it symbolizes the starting of the “mushrooming of housing sites” at Validebağ’s border and suffocating the grove as a part of “rent-seeking” urbanization in their terms, still continuing today. The former nurse, Suna narrated this as follows:

"After the '80s, gradually... the same person, the same man, the same chief physician here, sold a region to the military, I mean to the soldiers. Now, whether he provided an opportunity or not, I can't say now. Let it not be something absurd. For example, a housing complex was built there. The first loss of land occurred there.

Researcher: “Validebağ Housing Complex?”

Suna: “Yes, exactly. Near the 50th Year building, that housing complex. Let me put it this way. One side faces Koşuyolu, one side faces the hospital. A huge housing complex was built. I was working at that time, you know.... Then it was turned into a housing complex. Then another piece of land was given to Haydarpaşa High School, to the other Altunizade section. Because it belonged to the Ministry of National Education, they moved the main building of Haydarpaşa here, so to speak. Now, that place has become Haydarpaşa High School. And then a gate was opened from there, you know. Land was gradually acquired somehow. Everyone's eyes were on that land anyway, somehow. Such a vast area is empty now, isn't it? While everywhere else is crowded. What is it? I mean, the value of the land also affected that area. So, the land appreciated. It is already a very valuable area.”

Another Participant: “The place that later turned into Validebağ Housing Complex started as Levazım site. They didn't grant permits; permits were later obtained through the power of the coup. During the coup. But how it got the name Validebağ Housing Complex, I don't know that transition. Initially, permits couldn't be obtained. They were obtained through the coup later.” (Orhan Teacher inhabiting there since 1970's, at the Group interview with the Koşuyolu and Acıbadem residents)

Another Participant: “That area was called “the priest's vineyard”; it was private property. It was sold, and Validebağ Housing Complex was built there. Indeed, there was no building permit. After the September 12th coup, the Military set it up, and the first name of Validebağ Housing Complex was Levazım Officers' Cooperatives. After that, Özyurt Housing Complex was built, named military officers' cooperatives. Then, all those military officers there... they divided our region into pieces... for example, there's Site 61. For instance, it's for those who entered the Military Academy in '61. There's Site 62, for those who entered the Military Academy in '62. So, you understand, during that time, they looted that area in the era of Kenan Evren. The Altunizade region.” (Lütfü)

The ecological value of the grove has especially attracted investments for further housing expansion and has risen the real-estate values, while the grove itself turned to be a backyard for these housings in time. The real estate firms depict Validebağ's nature as "pristine" and

"untouched," emphasizing its appeal to enhance its marketability. On the other hand, the integration of urban greenery amidst residential and concrete structures has contributed to an increase in property values in the area. Both housing companies and private enterprises promote Validebağ's natural environment, offering a lifestyle intertwined with nature. An example of this can be observed in the real estate section of the *Milliyet* newspaper (2004, August 8), where private businesses leverage and advertise the ecological value for marketing purposes.

“Koşuyolu is in touch with nature: Koşuyolu, which is the villa-office area of the Anatolian side, is preferred because it is relatively green and in touch with nature. The visage of Koşuyolu, which consists of single and two-storey houses built 40 years ago for middle and low-income groups, is a district that has not been exposed to much distortion, although it has changed over time. While single and two-storey houses have been replaced by 3- and 3.5-storey villas in the last 15-20 years, the district's remaining in the city center over time and its proximity to the 1st Bosphorus Bridge has made this an attractive business center for companies.”

In a parallel manner, the upscale residential developments like "Validebağ Mansions" and "Grove Houses" that are gentrifying the neighborhood have been named to reference the Validebağ Grove. For example, both in advertisements and promotional films, “Validebağ Mansions” emphasizes the natural surroundings, highlighting their proximity to the Validebağ Grove.

“Validebağ is the address of peace with its lush green texture, unique atmosphere and distinguished residents who keep the old neighborhood culture alive, identified with the grove from which it takes its name... In this decent district, where neighborly relations can be maintained with the same warmth, you wake up to the unique scent of linden and pine trees. Validebağ Grove, the natural flora of Istanbul within the city, is located right across from VALIDEBAĞ MANSIONS, the exclusive address of mansion life. The grove, which has a size of 354 thousand square meters, is the most important recreation area of the region. Validebağ Grove, which hosts hundreds of bird species, some of which are migratory, and different creatures from butterflies to squirrels, enriches the lives of the distinguished owners of Validebağ Mansions with its natural beauties... A unique garden mansion life begins with its 'elite life' qualities, nature, peace, comfort, and serenity. Happiness-filled moments that you will spend with your family, surrounded by nature, await you in mansions with large gardens”. (DapYapı, 2018)

In this context, the concept of nature is simplified to a mere "green backdrop," offering a serene and unspoiled ambiance, associated with an exclusive and luxurious lifestyle. This perspective highlights how the societal perception of nature is manufactured and shaped to promote a certain lifestyle for privileged, while obscuring the underlying social dynamics that exploit nature as a means of capital accumulation strategy.

5.4. Park Projects: Remaking Validebağ's Socio-nature as Abstract Space

Henry Lefebvre characterizes "abstract space" as places where differences are eliminated, and uniformity is achieved through what he terms as "a non-aggression pact, a contract, as it were a non-violence" (1991, p. 56), facilitated by capitalist production relations: "This economy valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafes, cinemas, etc.), and thus gives rise to connotative discourses concerning these places; these in turn generate 'consensuses' or conventions according to which, for example, such and such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time, and so forth." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 56). That is, becoming homogenous and economically mediated, abstract spaces guarantee regulated "trouble-free zones" where individuals can peacefully enjoy themselves, supplanting the diverse vernacular uses and meanings.

Dating back to the 1990s, the ongoing efforts to transform the Validebağ Grove into a structured and regulated park, can be understood within this framework. Despite changes in political leadership within the Üsküdar municipality since the 1990s, plans to convert the Validebağ Grove into a park have consistently reemerged. However, these plans have faced staunch opposition from local-residents, grassroots organizations like the Validebağ Volunteers, and the Teachers' Union (EĞİTİM-SEN), who advocate preserving the existing ecological and symbolic significance of the area. Among those that aimed to appropriate the park, we can name the VALİDEBAĞ NATIONAL PARK project by the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) in 1992, followed by the VALİDEBAĞ PUBLIC NATIONAL PARK project in 1997 (Welfare Party (RP)), then the VALİDEBAĞ URBAN FOREST project in 2014 (Justice and Development Party, AKP), and finally, the VALİDEBAĞ PEOPLE'S GARDEN project in 2018 (Justice and Development Party (AKP)). These initiatives shared the goal of transforming the grove into a structured and uniform park.

The plans envisioned the grove as an unsecured vacant land requiring domestication and enhancement with recreational and commercial amenities to attract visitors. For instance, building upon the previous 1992 plan by the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), the Welfare Party in 1997 proposed the construction upon 700 square-meters a restaurant with a pool, upon 400 square-meters a cafeteria, upon 2,500 square-meters an arboretum, and upon 500 square-meters a museum, along with the development of roads covering 12,600 square-meters, and parking lots spanning 6,250 square-meters. It pledged that 90% of the region would remain as green spaces (207,100 square meters) (Cumhuriyet, 17 February 1997). Similarly, in 2014, just prior to the local elections, another park project titled "VALİDEBAĞ URBAN FOREST" proposed to create Istanbul's equivalent of Hyde Park by transforming the Validebağ Grove. The plan included the construction of observation terraces, children's playgrounds, ponds, walking and bicycle tracks, an amphitheater, and coffee shops. (Sabah, 22 February 2014). In a press release, the municipal governor Hilmi Türkmen stated that:

“Validebağ Grove will be the most beautiful urban forest on the Asian side of Istanbul. We won't use even a cubic meter of concrete. The entire project will be constructed using wood. Within the project, there will be observation terraces, natural ponds, and walking areas in the grove. We will build an amphitheater entirely from wood, have an open-air café, and wooden theaters. In other words, Validebağ will be the Hyde Park of the Asian side. The entire grove will be considered, and greenery will be added to its existing green... Our aim is to increase the green area per person from 7 square meters to 10 square meters.” (Türkmen, 2014).

As evident from the mayor's statement, the diverse vernacular culture of Validebağ has been ignored, instead, it has been identified with a simplistic notion of "green space," quantified solely by the number of trees or natural features (Figure 6). This reductionist view separates ecological value from its social context, characterizes green space as an abstract space, regardless of the broader socio-ecological dynamics (Figure 7).

Figure 6. People use Validebağ for picnicking freely in the unstructured greenery.



Source: Photograph taken by Ayşegül Boyalı

Figure 7. A visual of the “Validebağ Urban Forest” plan (2014).



Source: Üsküdar Post (2014)

Lastly, between the years 2018 to 2021, the nation-wide government-led People’s Garden Projects (*Millet Bahçeleri*) were put into effect with consequences regarding the Validebağ. While these projects were initially developed as urban park projects in the late Ottoman period as part of the state’s modernization agenda for urban reform purposes, recent People’s Garden projects of the government have been initiated as an instrument to capitalize on solutions to environmental issues bypassing the environmental movements, offer controlled forms of public presence, and invoke a vision of modernity entwined with the late Ottoman era, thus bypassing the Republican ideology (İnal, 2022). In Validebağ, the plan was to extensively equip the grove with a “Running/walking and trekking trail”, a “Bicycle trail”, “10 fitness areas”, a “Children’s play area”, a “soccer field and spectator stands”, a “Parking lot”, “104 seating elements”, “132 trash bins”, “Lighting poles”, and the “Construction of channels for water drainage”. The plan attempted to restructure Validebağ’s landscape through transforming this urban green into an abstract space defined above. With a long-lasting environmental struggle by grassroots resistance, and together with extensive judicial activism, People’s Garden Project was canceled (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Protests against park plans by Validebağ Volunteers (2021).



Source: Author

6. CONCLUSION

This study aims to contribute to the Urban Political Ecology literature in Turkey, focusing on urban public green spaces. Using Istanbul's Validebağ Grove as a case study, it analyzes the site's historical evolution and the societal dynamics at play. Through an in-depth historical analysis, it examines the process of neo-liberalization of Validebağ Grove's socio-nature with particular emphasis on the following events of the 1980s. Our study attempts to step in the direction of showing that the intertwining of the "ideology of nature", "technocratic" strategies together with the "deregulation and reregulation of state-power" to please the demands of capital facilitates the integration of urban public green spaces into the framework of urban capitalist expansion. We suggest that research on urban parks should reconsider the historical power dynamics inherent in green space management, which, unfortunately, often rely on the discourse-driven separation of nature from social dynamics at work. Furthermore, we underscore how top-down management of green spaces can render public greens into "abstract" realms, disregarding their existing forms of public encounters embedded in everyday life and substituting them with standardized uses driven by exchange value and services.

Thinking of the broader context of Istanbul's urban green, we consider critical and analytical tools, such as the UPE perspective that our study employs, are crucial in understanding the trajectory of city's gardens, parks, and forests, which today are increasingly produced and reproduced for attracting property development, rent-values, or

merely for becoming the backyards for the surrounding mansions as abstract spaces upon the erasure of their existing use-values. This prevalent tendency is apparent from other urgent cases not addressed here, such as the historical *Yedikule Bostans*, *Nation's Gardens* projects, or the mega projects in *Northern Forests*, and the infamous *Kanal İstanbul* project which threaten not just green space as such, but the destruction of urban agricultural production in Istanbul. In summary, the process of producing the urban green, as in the case of Validebağ Grove, as an abstract space driven by the "ideology of nature" and "technocratic" strategies together with the "deregulation and reregulation of state-power" serves the demands of capital accumulation, meanwhile disregarding the use-value inherent in space. Therefore, by offering this case study, we call for exposing various social processes that package urban parks, forests, and gardens as commodity forms in urban capitalist expansion and to focus on the prevalent discursive separation of nature from the realm of social. We also hope to underline the need for future research that concentrates on the struggles and socio-environmental assertions of grassroots organizations, which also contribute to the social production of space in a dialectical manner.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement: Throughout all stages of this article, we have adhered to the research and publication ethics principles of the Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Journal of Social Sciences.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally to the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement: Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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