# DEMOLITION MOVIES: THE URBAN POOR ON THE MARGINS OF THEIR STORY

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes how the popular cinema in Turkey, which showed a heightened interest in the gecekondu (slum or squatter house) problem in the late 1970s, tackled the question of representing the poor residents of these areas. The popular films – particularly the ones about the problem of demolition– denied a positive identity and agency to this group. The films positioned the squatters predominantly on the periphery of the narrative, although the gecekondu problem was at the center of the story. They appeared as a blurry crowd lurking behind or on the edges of the screen, unable to step in and be the leading actors of their own story. I argue that in the context of 1970s Turkey, the stereotypical image of the urban poor as a pragmatic or non-ideological (thus ambivalent, immature and unreliable) group was, at least in part, a constructed identity in which all the cultural elite contributed. This surprising collaboration between otherwise hostile ideological positions in constructing and reinforcing such an identity can be seen as a common reaction to the symbolic challenge that the squatters, as a new social formation falling outside or between traditional social categories, posed to all established frameworks of cultural production.

**Keywords:** Urban poor, cultural representation, identity, gecekondu.

## Yıkım Filmleri: Kendi Hikâyelerinin Kıyısında Gecekondululer

**Öz**

Bu makale, 1970'lerin sonlarına doğru gecekondu problemine giderek artan bir ilgi gösteren popüler sinemanın, buralarda oturan yoksul halkın kültürel temsili meselesi ile nasıl başa çıkmaya çalıştığını inceler. Popüler filmler –özellikle de yıkım sorunu ile ilgilenenler– bu gruba bir pozitif kimlik ve eylemlilik kapasitesi atfetmekten kaçınmıştır. Gecekondu problemi hikâyenin odağında olsa bile, filmler gecekondululeri ağırlıklı olarak anlatının çeperinde konumlamıştır. Onlar ekranın kenarlarında, içeri dalıp kendi hikâyelerinin baş aktörü olmaktan aciz, bulanık bir kalabalık olarak dururlar. Bu çalışmada, 1970'ler Türkiye'sinde şehirli yoksulların pragmatik veya ideoloji taşımayan (dolayısıyla muğlak, olgunlaşmamış ve güvenilmez) bir grup olduklarını yayan imajın, en azından kısmen, kültürel elitlerin tamamının katkısıyla inşa edilmiş bir kimlik olduğunu iddia ediyorum. Başka meselelerde birbirlerine düşman ideolojik pozisyonlar arasında bile böylesi bir kimliği oluşturmak ve desteklemek konusunda görülen bu şaşırtıcı uyum, geleneksel toplumsal kategorilerin dışında veya arasında bir yere düşen bu yeni sosyal formasyonun kültürel üretim alanındaki bütün yerleşik çerçeveler açısından sembolik bir zorluk yaratmasına karşı geliştirilen ortak bir tepki olarak açıklanabilir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Şehirli yoksullar, kültürel temsil, kimlik, gecekondu.

## Introduction

Squatting on the fringes of Turkey's metropolitan areas began in the late 1940s. As a result of the accelerated pace of rural-urban migration during the 1950s and 60s, nearly half the population of the largest cities had settled in slums by the 1970s. These areas were named *gecekondu*, and their residents were called *gecekondulu*. The massive problem of post-war squatter and slum housing was not unique to Turkey either. Different terms used in different places (such as *favela* in Brasil, *bustee* in India, *iskwater* in Philippines, *baladi* in Egypt, or *umjondolo* in South Africa) named the same basic phenomenon.

Along with economic, political and bureaucratic difficulties, urban squatting and slum dwelling in Turkey, and much of the developing world, also posed vital problems of *representation*. The task of identifying the urban poor, mostly composed of rural migrants concentrating in big numbers around the edges of Third World cities, has been an issue for the cultural elite since the end of World War II.[1] Despite widespread political and scholarly interest in this topic, however, there are still crucial gaps in the stories told of the urban poor in the developing world. There is a consistent pattern in the literature which draws a general picture of this ever-increasing group as pragmatic actors who have neither capacity nor intention to actively participate in the ideological construction or reproduction of society. Many of these studies make their claims and justify their concerns by resting on a rich body of empirical evidence about the observable attitudes and behaviors of the urban poor. Yet, in this process, they neglect to turn a critical eye on the cultural representations, which have the effect of essentializing what is, at least in part, a social/symbolic construction.

In Turkey, the gecekondu phenomenon captured the interest of journalists, social scientists and filmmakers throughout the 1960s and especially 1970s when rapid urbanization and radical political contestation were at their height. Numerous reports about the gecekondus in this period made it onto the pages of newspapers with different political affiliations from far right to radical left. It also became the major concern for the urban social scientists who studied this problem from the incompatible perspectives of cultural modernization and political economy. Furthermore, one film about the gecekondu demolitions followed another in the late 1970s. Drawing on a popular perception of social problems, these films placed the gecekondu issue within a Manichean world composed of the rich and the poor.

The gecekondulu were represented in different fields of media and from dramatically different socio-political and ideological perspectives. The systematic and comprehensive analysis of these diverse representations[2] reveals, however, a surprising level of consistency or an elite consensus according to which the gecekondulu were a people devoid of an ideological commitment, a

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[1] For a detailed review of this literature, see Avcı, 2011, p. 12-24.

[2] For an in-depth analysis of newspapers and scholarly works on the gecekondu problem, see Avcı, 2011, p. 110-180.

dubious and unreliable group, and even a potential threat to the public order and to the healthy development of society. The decade of the 1970s was such a turbulent period that the hostility between the ideological camps was extremely intense, and the deep political split between the Right and the Left brought the country to the edge of a civil war. Each side was denouncing the other for blindly and carelessly serving the interests of a perverse ideology. Yet these hostile camps, locked in a bitter ideological battle, commonly regarded the gecekondulu as a threat to their particular political agendas because of not being ideological enough.

Every symbolic system, bounded by a set of predefined categories, provides a particular, and inevitably selective and limited, understanding of social facts. Occupying an ambiguous position between rural and urban, traditional and modern, or peasant and industrial proletariat,[3] the gecekondu people were especially subject to such a limitation. They did not fit in any of these categories conventionally used to identify social groups both in scholarly and popular contexts throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This symbolic complication was challenging to the authority of the established theoretical and/or ideological frameworks over how to understand and interfere in the social processes properly. In response, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic perspectives resorted to the same strategy of identifying the gecekondulu as essentially non-ideological actors. By begrudging the urban poor a subject position, any established perspective of symbolic production freed itself from its inability to comprehend a massive social formation and from the necessity of revising its conventional ways of envisioning social life, and instead, ascribed the incapacity, inability, or lack to the gecekondu people themselves.

My study examines how popular cinema was involved in this politics of representation. The world depicted in popular films was split between the poor and the rich. These two sides were alien and hostile to each other, and the movies sided clearly with the poor and against the rich. In the popular vocabulary of these filmic narratives, the poor gecekondulu were *Us* as opposed to the villainous rich, or *Them*. However, even a feeling of sympathy that their Us-ness evoked did not save the gecekondulu of popular cinema from ambiguity and doubt around their identity. They were predominantly portrayed in these films as an unthinking and unreliable group which had neither a true understanding of their own problems nor self-confidence, capability or determination to find a solution.

Following a brief explanation of what I call *demolition movies* and an introduction of the films analyzed in this study, I lay out the dualistic social structure in these movies which reduces the core conflict in the story to a binary opposition between the poor and the rich. Then, I briefly talk about the stock types in these melodramatic narratives, who, as compared to the tragic

[3] These binary oppositions were expressive of the paradigm of modernization [called "grand conflict paradigm" by Kahraman (2002, p. 621) or "grand dichotomy" by Karakayalı (2001, p. 129)], which has long dominated the perceptions and discussions of social change in Turkey.

characters, look more like the representatives of a social group rather than being particular individuals. In the rest of the article, I carry out an analysis of the ways in which the gecekondu people are represented in these narratives. Through the use of stock types, the demolition movies framed any conflict emanating from the gecekondu problem as a social rather than personal issue. Hence, they were involved in the problem of representing the gecekondulu figure as a general social category. My analyses show that the popular vision in the movies replicated and reinforced a widespread image of this social group at the time, according to which gecekondulu is nothing more than a non-identity characterized by ambivalence, immaturity, and unreliability.

## The Gecekondu Problem in Popular Cinema

Urban poverty was a popular theme in Turkish cinema during the 1960s and '70s (Yıldız, 2008, p. 85). Seeing poverty mostly as a corollary to rural-urban migration, the films depicted problems related to the poor migrants' socio-economic and cultural adaptation to urban life. As expected, the neighborhoods where the urban poor lived, i.e. the gecekondus, also frequently appeared on the big screen. What is remarkable is that only towards the second half of the 1970s did the gecekondu problem per se, and particularly demolitions, attract an increasing attention of film producers and directors, although the urban poor in Turkey had been experiencing such dramatic events for the previous two decades. Perhaps the unprecedented level of violent political contestation and increasing sensitivity to social problems throughout the society was a factor behind this interest at that time.[4]

Approximately two thousand films were made in Turkey in the 1970s,[5] and nine of them were about gecekondu demolitions. I call this group the *demolition movies* which basically tell the same story: a rich man wants, out of greed, to tear down the poor's houses, and a hero with some fantastic or superhuman qualities protects them from destruction. Eight of these nine demolition movies were made in the second half of the decade: two in 1975 [*Beş Milyoncuk Borç Verir misin?* (*Would You Owe Me Just Five Million?*, Osman F. Seden) and *Deli Yusuf* (*Mad Yusuf,* Atıf Yılmaz)], two in 1976 [*Deli Şahin* (*Mad Şahin,* Cüneyt Arkın) and *Yarınsız Adam* (*The Man Without a Future,* Remzi Jöntürk)], one in 1977 [*Yıkılmayan Adam* (*The Indestructible Man,* Remzi Jöntürk)], two in 1978 [*Derdim Dünyadan Büyük* (*My Problem is Bigger than the Whole Wide World*, Şerif Gören), and *Sultan* (*Sultan,* Kartal Tibet)], and one

[4] Also, some of the most extreme cases of gecekondu demolitions took place in this period, including the one in the *1 Mayıs* (*1st of May*) neighborhood of Ümraniye-İstanbul, which resulted in 6 people dead, about 50 people wounded, more than 200 people detained and tens of thousands of them homeless and destitute. This may be another reason behind producers' and directors' increasing interest in gecekondu demolitions at the end of 1970s.

[5] For this study, I have looked through the synopsis of every one of these movies by resorting to two online data bases (www.sinematurk.com, and www.turksinemasi.com) and a quite comprehensive anthology of Turkish cinema by Giovanni Scognamillo, *Türk Sinema Tarihi* (*The History of Turkish Cinema*, 1998).

in 1979 [*Umudumuz Şaban* (*Our Hope, Şaban,* Kartal Tibet)]. In addition, there are seven more movies made in the same period providing an extensive representation of the gecekondu areas, residents or problems other than demolition: two from 1977 [*İbo ile Güllüşah* (*İbo and Güllüşah,* Atıf Yılmaz) and *Kan/Deli Kadir* (*Blood/Mad Kadir,* Remzi Jöntürk)], three from 1978 [*Çilekeş* (*The Sufferer,* Osman Seden), *100 Numaralı Adam* (*The Man with Number 100*, Osman Seden) and *Altın Şehir* (*The Golden City,* Orhan Elmas)], one from 1979 [*Demir Yol* (*The Rail Way,* Yavuz Özkan)], and one from 1980 [*Devlet Kuşu* (*Godsend,* Memduh Ün)]. Although I focus mainly on the demolition movies, my analyses cover the second group as well. I refer to all fifteen films mentioned above as the *gecekondu movies*.[6]

## The City: A Tale of Two Worlds

The gecekondu movies represent a divided city between the rich and the poor. The two sides of this city are not only alien, but also hostile to each other. The use of contrasting shots of the gecekondu and apartment houses is quite common in these films, especially in their opening scenes or shortly after, which depict the rich/poor dichotomy through spatial references. Thus, they set the stage for the rest of the narrative on the basis of the gecekondu-apartment opposition.

*Mad Yusuf*, for instance, begins with a speech by Abbas, the rich antagonist, at the opening ceremony of a public fountain that he built in a gecekondu neighborhood.[7] He talks about how hard they are working to serve the people and how bright the country's future is, and he says "being rich is our main target." However, Abbas's speech is cut intermittently by some shots that disprove everything he says: The bulldozers raze gecekondu houses somewhere else, and smash furniture, while women and children try to run away from these noisy, monster-like machines, and cry out with despair. The close-up shots of gecekondu demolitions are intercut with the views of newly built apartments at some distance from the demolition site. The apartments appear right after Abbas says "There are no exploiters, my friends!" which is again followed by the

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[6] To be sure, urban poverty and rural-urban migration in Turkey appeared in many more films. In his book *Gecekondu Sineması* (*The Cinema of Gecekondu*, 2008), Yıldız analyzes movies from different genres (social realist, avant-garde, popular etc.) about rural migrants and urban poverty in Turkish cinema. Although he does not give a statistical information about the number of movies which more or less touched on these issues, his list adds up to approximately one hundred films. Considering that this list by Yıldız does not include most of the films I analyze in this study, it would be safe to say that hundreds of movies were made in Turkey which more or less included images, sounds, lines, or parts somehow related to the gecekondu phenomenon.

[7] Abbas's dress (particularly his hat) and manner of speaking, reminds the audience of a prominent politician of this period, Süleyman Demirel. The leader of the most powerful centre-right party in the 1970s, Demirel served as the prime minister between 1965 and 1980 at intervals and in the early 1990s, who later became the President. Demirel has been a true model for the stereotypical politician image in Turkey as a populist figure who can easily convince people through his unrealistic promises and expertise at equivocating. His hat (a black fedora) was Demirel's symbol, which he often used while hailing the masses.

images of smashed-up gecekondus. Through successive shots of gecekondus and apartment buildings, this opening scene represents the city as divided and conflictual from the outset. Also, it ties this opposition to a more general conflict between the rich and the poor, the exploiters and the exploited.

*Sultan* starts out with a series of short scenes showing the leading female character, Sultan, doing various chores while trying to make her children behave by shouting at or spanking them. This sequence in Sultan's gecekondu is followed by another sequence in which we see Sultan scrubbing a carpet on her knees in a luxurious apartment, while the stylish lady of the house is sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed. Then, the lady gets up and yells at Sultan for some reason (during these early scenes dialogues are inaudible and we only hear the music at the background). Sultan, very angry, yells back. It is not crucial for the audience to know exactly what the quarrel is about, because the whole point is to show the built-in tension between the lady and the woman.[8] When Sultan, in a later scene, tells her friends from the gecekondus about this incident, she does not explain what the problem was, but she just says "I would almost punch her in the mouth. Are we servants or donkeys?" One of her friends ends this dialogue by saying "Of course, well done, girl. Don't pander to the rich folks' whims. Or else, they shit on your head." The opposition between apartment and gecekondu, where the lady and the woman belong respectively, becomes a symbolic landmark in the general conflict between their social identities.

The prelude of *Blood/Mad Kadir* also illustrates these profound tensions. Kadir's big brother has an accident while working at the construction site of an apartment building. Because they are poor, Kadir spends too much time to find money and get the blood for the transfusion that his brother needs. When he finally manages to bring the blood to the hospital, he sees his brother's dead body lying on a gurney. Shortly after, Kadir kills the building contractor who is responsible for his brother's death with a gun in front of a half-built apartment building. The gun was given to him by another, rival, contractor who wants to own the other's "million-dollar apartments." Because of these two rich men, who care about nothing but making millions by building apartments, Kadir loses his brother and goes to jail. Years go by quickly in jail. We hear a poem in Kadir's voice about his anger, accompanied by the images of gecekondu houses and apartments one after another. As soon as he is released as a grown-up man, Kadir goes to the second developer's office, and says to him "You turn children into killers in order to build million-dollar apartments, deyyus,"[9] and then, shoots his gun. This is the point very early in the film where Kadir's story as an assassin begins. The big brother's death and Kadir's turning into a criminal because of greedy men, who build apartments to get even richer, are shown as the key events upon which the story builds.

These examples could easily be multiplied. Representation of a larger social conflict between the poor and the rich through an opposition between

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[8] In Turkey, many lower-class women are hired daily by their upper-class counterparts for doing chores, and these waged domestic workers are called *kadın*, i.e. woman.

[9] This is a common swearword in Turkish, meaning "pimp".

gecekondu and apartment was very common in this period. Moreover, the poor-rich dichotomy was the primary paradigm in almost all Yesilçam[10] melodramas. These films were almost exclusively about a complicated love affair between a poor girl and a rich boy who were "from different worlds," a cliché used in these movies referring to the impossibility of a marriage between the lovers because of their class differences. Similarly, in arabesk[11] movies, a variant of the classical Yeşilçam melodramas, the poor lovers could not usually unite because of a rich villain. Thus the audience of popular Turkish cinema was already familiar with the divided city of the gecekondu movies. The particularity of these movies comes from their representation of the struggle over land and housing as not only an economic but also a symbolic problem. Gecekondu has always been a symbol of "the hidden injuries of class" (Sennett and Cobb, 1993), along with indicating economic inferiority.[12] Accordingly, the gecekondus in the demolition films are depicted as places that shelter people who are poor not only materially but also culturally. These people do not understand how things work in the world run by the powerful, and are therefore ill-equipped to keep hold of their only possession, i.e., the gecekondu houses. Therefore, they need a hero from without who knows how to deal with the rich, i.e. the sovereigns of this order, in every sense.

## Stock Types in the Demolition Movies

By depicting a world split between the rich and the poor, frequently through the use of gecekondu-apartment duality, the films situate the gecekondu

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[10] Yesilçam was the nickname of the Turkish film industry in the 1960s and 1970s, similar to Hollywood in The United States. It was named after a street in the Beyoğlu district of İstanbul where many actors, directors, technical staff and studios were based.

[11] Arabesk is the name given to a peculiar kind of music in Turkey which emerged in the late 1960s and became very popular especially among the urban lower classes. The arabesk singers appeared as the leading actors in many films in the 1970s and 80s, which are, for this reason, known as arabesk movies.

[12] The opposition between gecekondu and apartment as a metaphor of larger social conflicts has been embedded in the cultural fabric of urban life in Turkey. When you type the keyword gecekondu on the most popular Turkish confession website, www.itiraf.com, the first (i.e. the oldest) entry you see (posted on 28 December 2000 by a 26-year-old man) is the following: "I live in a gecekondu neighborhood. So, our house is also a gecekondu (i.e., detached). I hate that I have always been ashamed of this. I have always kept it a secret at university, at work, and from all my friends. I always wanted to hear from somebody I knew that he was also from a gecekondu like me. That has never happened. It has always hurt my feelings to hear words related to the apartment life such as 'upstairs' or 'downstairs.' I always say to myself that I wish I could talk about 'the son of our next-door neighbor.' Even at this age I feel the same. I turn red most when I need to tell or write my address. It is too bad, isn't it? I am ashamed" [this confession was first quoted by Necmi Erdoğan (2002, p. 24)]. In Turkey, if you live in an apartment, your building number and flat number are separated by a "/". After quoting the confession above, Erdoğan makes the following observation: "The '/' sign, indicating that your house is an apartment unit, becomes a signifier that functions as the 'condensation point' of social divisions and hierarchies" (2002, p. 24).

problem in the context of a larger conflict between two social groups. In this section, I talk about the use of stock types in the gecekondu movies, which motivates a perception of these antagonistic sides as homogeneous communities and highlights further the dual structure of the urban society. Beyond the filmic narrative, this representational choice, i.e. the use of stock types, relates to a general tendency to homogenize the squatters as a distinct group, which is the source of the main question that I examine in this study, i.e., how to represent the gecekondulu as a social figure.

The demolition movies carry some basic features of melodramatic narratives, one of which is related to the distinction between types and characters. William P. Steele observes that all figures in melodrama are nothing but puppets acting as parts of a machine that carry the plot along: "Strictly speaking, there are no characters in melodrama, there are only types, easily recognized and constantly recurring" (1968, p. 4). Unlike the "divided" characters in tragedy with inner conflicts and controversial desires, melodramatic figures are

> […] essentially 'whole' […] The evil man who is wholly evil is prevented by his wholeness from the self-understanding that might curb his villainy, and the wholly good man who looks inward has nothing to contemplate but his own virtuous perfection. It follows that the undivided protagonist of melodrama has only external pressures to fight against: an evil man, a social group, a hostile ideology, a natural force, an accident or chance, an obdurate fate or a malign deity. It is this total dependence upon external adversaries which finally separates melodrama from all other serious dramatic forms (Smith, 1973, p. 7-8).

Because the internally undivided protagonist and antagonist of melodrama never contradict their typical traits of being good or evil, the conflict in melodrama is always external. So, the "dichotomizing of the world" or "Manicheanism" is within the constitutional strategies of melodrama (Landy, 1991, p. 15).

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan suggests a classification of narrative figures on the basis of the relative complexity of the traits associated with them. At one pole of the axis stand the least complex ones: "allegorical figures, caricatures, and types" which are generally "constructed around a single trait or around one dominant trait along with a few secondary ones" and whose "prominent trait is grasped as representative of a whole group rather than as a purely individual quality" (1989, p. 41). The melodramatic figures fit in the category of "types" in Rimmon-Kenan's classification, according to which they act as representatives of conflicting social groups, rather than being individual subjects. Such is the metaphoric quality of melodramatic figures, which, according to Marcia Landy (1991, p. 45), establishes a link between personal conflicts in a narrative and larger (sexual, racial and/or class) conflicts in society.

Stock types, not characters, recurrently appear in the popular gecekondu movies, which look like one-dimensional or typical representatives of a social group rather than being complex individuals. This is even more so in the demolition movies which are, unlike the classical Yesilçam stories, already about a social problem instead of a love affair. All gecekondu movies show two

worlds, existing side by side in the city, yet mutually exclusive and even hostile, symbolized by a contrast between gecekondu and apartment. The recurrent use of stock types, some of whom have turned out to be the cult figures of Turkish cinema, has the effect of rendering the opposition between the two sides as a collective, rather than individual, matter.

There are four stock types in the demolition movies: hero, heroine, villain, and gecekondulu. Because the particular focus of this article is on the representations of the gecekondulu figure, I will talk about the other three types only briefly. The villain is always a rich businessman who sometimes seems to be a politician or to have close connections with the political authority. He (or rather, the group he represents, i.e., the rich) is where the threat to the gecekondu people comes from. The heroine, also rich, is usually the villain's daughter. She falls in love with the hero although she knows almost nothing about him and even if he turns out to be the enemy of her father and her social class. At first, the heroine is shown as a spoiled, arrogant, and snobby girl, who represents her class perfectly. However, the hero becomes her strongest and only desire as soon as she meets him. Such that, in the end, she starts to hate her own world including her father, and wants to stay with the hero. It should also be noted, on the other hand, that the person whom the hero falls in love with is always from the rich class, which underlines his symbolic distance from the poor. In fact, all action in the story, including fights as well as love affairs, takes place between the powerful types (the hero, the villain, and the heroine), and the gecekondulu mostly stay as a neutral or ineffectual element although the main problem of the film is directly related to these people's lives.

The hero plays a central role in the story. The demolition movies can be categorized into three according to what type of a hero they feature: tough-hero fantasies (*Mad Yusuf*, *Mad Şahin*, *The Man Without a Future* and *The Indestructible Man*), comic-hero fantasies (*Our Hope, Şaban* and *Would You Owe Me Just Five Million*), and non-fantastic ones (*My Problem is Bigger than the Whole Wide World* and *Sultan*). Although all cultural representations are fantastic in the sense that they construct their own version of reality from a particular point of view, I call the first two categories of demolition movies *fantastic* because they have a quasi-superhero figure who adds an additional layer of fantasy to the narrative through his unusual powers. Tough heroes, for instance, are portrayed as (and in some cases even directly called) "the champion of the oppressed,"[13] who are insanely courageous (so their common nickname, "the mad"), lonely, mysterious, and practically unbeatable men.[14] Therefore, despite certain realistic features of these films (such as shooting some outdoor scenes in the real gecekondu neighborhoods), the superhero-like characteristics of the protagonist and his role in the story as the protector or

[13] This is also the title of an episode from *Superman*, the comic book, published in 1939.
[14] For a detailed analysis of tough-hero fantasies, see Avcı, 2011, p. 198-224.

savior of the gecekondulu, i.e., his being "a fundamental fantasy figüre,"[15] give these narratives a peculiarly fantastic quality. This is true also for *Our Hope, Şaban*, which is another demolition movie, only with a comic hero. Şaban[16] is an equally fantastic figure (in the sense that he has unusual features as a person), who helps, in miraculous ways, the poor gecekondulu protect their houses from the rich antagonist's villainous plans to tear them down.[17] Just like the tough hero, the comic hero is separated from the gecekondu people through his peculiar personality: funny or silly looks and demeanor, mysterious identity, and unbelievable good luck. The most apparent difference of the comic hero from the tough hero, however, is related to the main source of his power: What marks Şaban's heroic being is not madness but foolishness. Şaban the Fool looks like a parody of Kadir (or, Murat, Yusuf, or Şahin) the Mad of the tough-hero fantasies, but he still plays a similar role of the "fundamental fantasy figure."

I call the last category of the demolition movies non-fantastic (aside from the fact that they also construct their own vision of reality) because these movies do not feature a hero with almost superhuman qualities. The leading figures in *My Problem is Bigger than the Whole Wide World* and *Sultan*, Orhan and Sultan, are not equipped with some unusual qualities unlike the comic or tough heroes. Still, they are also distinguished from the other gecekondu residents by their unyielding character and leadership ability. Because of their distinctive character, they are called, similar to the tough heroes, "mad" by the villainous figures in these films. They try hard to save the gecekondu houses from getting torn down, but they do not have any extraordinary power that would elevate them to the rank of other fantastic heroes. Due to this lack of an additional fantastic element, however, Orhan and Sultan fail in their efforts. Aside from the characteristics of the hero, all stock types are present in these two demolition movies as well: a rich villain who threatens the livelihood of squatters, the villain's own child who falls in love with the protagonist, and a group of gecekondu residents who desperately need help to save their houses. Therefore, in my analysis of how the gecekondu people are represented, I do not separate the fantastic and non-fantastic films.

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[15] Todd McGowan uses this expression for Schindler, the leading character in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), who is "a father strong enough to protect us from […] the mass slaughter of Jews by Nazis" (2007, p. 145).

[16] Şaban (also known as Şaban the Cow), created by Kemal Sunal, is an iconic figure in Turkish cinema. He can be compared to The Tramp of Charlie Chaplin for his good-hearted, despised yet obstinate character.

[17] *Would You Owe Me Just Five Million* is also a fantastic comedy about gecekondu demolitions, made in 1975. Unlike the other fantasies, however, there is not a fantastic hero in this movie who helps the poor residents beat the rich villain. Instead, the neighborhood is saved through another miraculous way: the big prize in the national lottery. The protagonists of this movie (played by Zeki Alasya and Metin Akpınar, a famous comic duo) are not extraordinary or fantastic characters. They only have the defining feature of the poor in popular Turkish cinema: They love and care for their neighbors, and are good enough to share the lottery money with others. So, this movie's fantastic solution against the menace of demolition is a miraculously earned money, which is a job done by the fantastic heroes in the other films.

## The Gecekondu People

In this section, I provide a detailed analysis of how the popular movies from the 1970s, fantastic or otherwise, (re)produced a representation of the gecekondu people as an incapacitated and even dangerous group. In this period, different products from different fields of cultural representation (including cinema, journalism and social sciences), which offered an alternative way to understand the society properly, regarded the gecekondu people as deprived of an ideological agency, and thus, as a potential threat to their respective social vision. What made this absolute agreement on the gecekondulu identity especially remarkable was that it happened at a time of unprecedentedly intense political and ideological contestation and controversy in Turkey. How could it become possible even for the ideological enemies to arrive at a striking consensus on the gecekondu people's identity while they fiercely opposed to each other on every other issue? The answer to this question, I think, lies in this new group's unconventional social formation (falling somewhere between the categories of rural and urban, traditional and modern, peasantry and proletariat, consumer and producer etc.) which challenged any established framework's authority to explain the reality in a true and comprehensive way.

**An unidentified crowd on the margins.** The basic paradigm in the gecekondu movies, or the agonistic core that moves the narrative along, has a social character: antagonism between the poor and the rich. The socio-economic aspect of the gecekondu phenomenon, primarily related to the housing question and controversy over the right to use or own urban land, constitutes the actual content of this paradigm in the movies. So, it is the gecekondu people and their common problems that the story focuses on. Despite having a central place in the story, however, the gecekondu people occupy a peripheral place on the screen, i.e. in how the story is narrated, which is compatible with the common perception in this period of the gecekondulu as a marginal social identity.

The gecekondu residents are represented, particularly in the fantastic movies, as an unidentified group rather than individuals.[18] Many scenes from these movies facilitate a perception of the gecekondulu as a single body that always acts together, en masse. Because the gecekondu people in these scenes look as static as buildings and land, they seem as if they were an integral part of physical space, i.e., the gecekondu neighborhood. The squatters usually form either a line or a circle near the edges of the screen in these scenes. They look as if they frame the shot along with the gecekondu houses behind them, as if they stand on the border between the symbolic (the movie) and the reality (the

[18] The two non-fantastic films, *My Problem Is Bigger than the Whole Wide World* and *Sultan*, are slightly different from the others in that respect. Only in these two movies, a handful of gecekondu residents have names known to the audience. Moreover, it is only in these movies that we see a detailed depiction of the inside of some gecekondu houses unlike the fantastic movies where the gecekondu neighborhood is always shown from a longer distance, depicting only the exteriors of the rambling houses in which live a mostly unidentified crowd. Regardless, however, all major points that I make about the representations of the gecekondulu in demolition movies apply to the non-fantastic films as well.

audience), watching the action going on in front of them, and cheering or applauding sometimes which is the only way they get involved in the action.

There are many scenes in these movies exemplifying the peripheral appearance of the gecekondu people as if they were only a part of the *décor* and their marginal role in the action going on at the center of the shot. The demolition scenes, which are the climactic points of any story, are especially demonstrative in that respect. These scenes portray the squatters as helpless in the face of the villain's power. In *Mad Yusuf*, during the hero and heroine's wedding ceremony amidst the gecekondus, while the residents are cheering and clapping for the couple and dancing with joy, a few bulldozers appear in the background, on top of the hill overlooking the gecekondu neighborhood. All of a sudden, the joyful crowd stands petrified upon the frightening appearance of these monstrous machines which have large blades with enormous metal teeth and also make a very loud noise. Then, the villain shows up on top of the hill in his black outfits. Via a megaphone, he calls out to the gecekondu people standing still and staring at him:

> Hey, you people below there! It is I speaking, your patron Abbas Bolulu. You ungrateful dogs! Are you aware of what you're doing? Don't you know that you cannot stand up to me? Don't obey Mad Yusuf since he is an enemy of wealth. Now, you have thirty minutes to give my daughter [the heroine] back. Otherwise, these monsters [he shows the bulldozers by his side moving their heavy blades up and down with a loud creaky sound] will raze your houses to the ground. Do you hear me, you below there?

The position of the people below the hill and their static picture contrast with the villain's authoritative and amplified voice coming from above, which is an obvious allusion to the social hierarchy between them. The people below look small from where the villain looks at them. The villain, to whom the people seem as small as children, also scolds them and tells them what to do or what not to do like a father trying to discipline his mischievous children.

A very similar peripheral positioning of the gecekondulu, both in terms of the place they occupy on the screen and their weakness vis-à-vis the villain's power, can be seen in the other demolition scenes in *Mad Şahin*, *My Problem Is Bigger Than The Whole Wide World*, *Sultan*, and *Our Hope, Şaban*. In the films not having a comparable demolition scene, there are other shots similarly depicting the poor residents as unable to resist against the villain's attacks by themselves. In these scenes, the people's only function is to applaud for the hero and to rely on his fantastic powers to get rid of the villain. We see this blurry crowd composed of anonymous people in *The Man without a Future*, *Blood/ Mad Kadir* and *The Undestructible Man*. The two non-fantastic movies, *My Problem Is Bigger than the Whole Wide World* and *Sultan*, are slightly different from the others in that respect. Only in these two movies, a handful of gecekondu residents have names known to the audience. Moreover, it is only in these movies that we see a detailed depiction of the inside of some gecekondu houses unlike the fantastic movies where the gecekondu neighborhood is shown from a longer distance, depicting only the exteriors of the rambling houses in which live a mostly unidentified crowd.

**Little people.** I have suggested an analogy above between children (their subordinate yet indeterminate position which requires father's discipline and guidance to incorporate them into the symbolic order) and the gecekondulu of the demolition movies (their similarly ambiguous position vis-à-vis the authority figures including both the villain and the hero). There are many examples of infantilization of the gecekondu people in these movies both by the villain and the hero. In *Mad Yusuf*, the hero tells the crowd surrounding him about the deal he has made with the villain by saying "Once I finished this job [making a super car for the villain], Abbas Bolulu will give your title deeds. […] Just be concerned with what you will get, and leave the rest to me. Now, dismiss!" His authoritative tone and reproving attitude are compatible with his role as a father figure, which is supplemented by the submissive demeanor of the gecekondu people. Similarly, the villain says to the gecekondu people in another scene "if you all be good, we will give you everything," with the kind yet evasive and slightly threatening attitude of a father.

In *The Man without a Future*, it is literally only the children, along with the hero, who face the villain and his bulldozers in the demolition scene of a school in the neighborhood. A representation of the gecekondu people through infantilization is also reinforced by the frequent use of children's images, as in a scene from *Mad Şahin*: while a group of gecekondu residents talk with each other about how desperate and weak they are in face of the villain's power, the camera constantly shows dingy children in the dusty streets of the neighborhood sitting, playing or eating a piece of bread. In *Sultan*, likewise, various images of the poor children playing in the gecekondu neighborhood accompany Muhtar's (the elected headman of the neighborhood) conversation with the investors who try to acquire the neighborhood's land. Muhtar says "We have to evacuate them [the gecekondu residents] one by one, without attracting so much attention. The purpose here is not to give them the opportunity to unite. I brought these trifling folks here, and I can kick them out. When we slip a few coins into their hands, these savages would go and live anywhere." In Muhtar's words, the gecekondu people are portrayed as untamed yet defenseless and easy-to-fool as children (especially the poor children like we see in this scene).

In a similar scene in *Our Hope, Şaban*, the villain (the rich constructor), standing on top of a hill that overlooks the gecekondu neighborhood, shows the gecekondu houses below to the contract killer he hires to terrorize the neighborhood. Although the killer is worried that "if the people unite" it would be difficult to "defeat them," the villain is confident:

> They cannot do anything. This land is registered to me. They can do nothing but get the out of here. Who told them to come here from their villages in the first place? What are they doing in İstanbul? They ruined the whole beauty of the city. If we slip a few coins into their hands, they will gladly go away. These savages can live anywhere. Then, this place will turn into paradise with apartment buildings I will erect here.

Just like in the previous example, as the villain utters these words, we are shown different images of some shabby children playing or running around the gecekondu houses. The villain in this scene appears as the voice of the dominant social discourse that sees the gecekondu houses and people as a symptom of

modernization that the city proper should get rid of. Accompaniment of the poor children's images to a succinct utterance of a widespread perception about the gecekondu people provides another example of how an analogy between childness and poor-ness facilitates the social or symbolic construction of a gecekondulu identity as weak and uneducated in need of outside manipulation from an authority figure.

Such a representation of the gecekondulu identity offers a stark contrast to an established identity like the working class which has an agency and a more coherent identity, fitting more easily into the frameworks of social scientists and political parties. Another movie made in 1979 provides a striking example to demonstrate the contrasting representations of the figures of squatter and worker in this period. The title of this movie is *Demir Yol* (*The Rail Way*), which has a clear connotation with one of the largest revolutionary organization at the time, *Dev Yol* (an abbreviation of *Devrimci Yol* / *The Revolutionary Way*). The movie has an overt political message and an agitprop approach, which mainly shows the struggle of a group of railway workers for their rights. It represents the workers as a class-for-itself who are aware of their political identity and mission, and who carry out an active resistance against the bourgeoisie and the state which is controlled by capital.

The film also shows the residents of a gecekondu neighborhood in a few scenes. A group of revolutionaries steal a truck full of food, and bring it to the gecekondu neighborhood to distribute the food to the people there. When they see the truck approaching, the children playing in the dusty streets of the neighborhood run towards it. Men and women, in their peasant-like clothes, also step out of their houses. Some of them hesitate to come near the truck, but still hundreds of people gather around. Most likely, these people we see in the movie are the residents of this neighborhood in real life as well. While the revolutionaries try to distribute whatever in the truck, they also shout slogans about the people's rights, exploitation in the country, fascism, class conflict etc. Meanwhile, the camera pans over the people. We do not see any of them talking. Not only we do not hear their voice, many of them do not even move. They just stand there, listening to the strangers with a puzzled look in their eyes and hesitating to come and take a few things from the truck. Then, the police come to the neighborhood. Suddenly, all the gecekondu people disperse like frightened birds. In a few seconds, nobody remains in sight other than the revolutionaries and the police, who then start shooting at each other. The revolutionaries get in their car and drive away with the police chasing them. Then, the camera shows all kinds of food scattered around and crushed in the street for about ten seconds. When the camera backs up a little, we see the gecekondu people ahead, standing in a line near the upper edge of the screen. The camera pans over and then focuses on them. Men, women, and children, some still holding what food they could grab a few minutes ago, look very desperate and incapable of doing anything, as they just stand there, motionless, and look behind their unexpected visitors with blank eyes.

The contrast between the class-conscious proletariat and the gecekondu people is very apparent in this movie. *The Rail Way* clearly reflects how difficult, even from the perspective of a counter-hegemonic (i.e., radical-left)

discourse, it is to imagine the urban poor or squatters as a social category to participate in the long-awaited socialist revolution. This portrayal of the gecekondulu as an unreliable group from the perspective of a counter-hegemonic project reinforces their image as a potential barrier to any vision of ideal social transformation.

**Scary little people.** Depiction of the gecekondulu as an immature or infantile social identity in the demolition movies conveys this group's dangerous potential for the hegemonic order, as well, which is analogous to the potential troubles that a child can cause because of not being totally incorporated in the symbolic order of the adult's world. A child has an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the father figure, i.e. the authoritative voice of the symbolic order. They are seen as inferior and easy to mould, but during this process, they also pose a potential threat as they have not yet completely internalized this order. Accordingly, the gecekondu people in these movies also have an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the villain representing the dominant order or the power holders. The squatters are generally portrayed as weak and desperate, who cannot do anything without help from a fantastic figure or an exceptional leader, yet there are also instances in these films where they mobilize in a moment of effervescence. Towards the end of *Mad Yusuf*, after some gecekondus have been torn down by the bulldozers and the hero has gone to save the heroine, one of the residents say "He [the hero] went to fight [against the villain]. Are we going to leave him alone? Are we going to keep living like dogs?" Then, everybody attacks the villain's men and the bulldozers. Similarly, in *The Indestructible Man*, the gecekondu people, led by the hero's father, fight against the villain's men with shovels or rocks to protect their houses, and in *My Problem Is Bigger than the Whole Wide World*, they block the bulldozers' way by sitting in the street and try to save their houses. In the demolition scene towards the end of *Mad Şahin*, the gecekondu people stand aside and watch the hero with worried eyes while he is fighting alone with the villain's men to protect the gecekondus. For a while, the villain's men beat him very badly. The hero does not really seem to be able to defeat the bad guys this time. Right at this moment, the camera shows a small child in the crowd. The child starts screaming "Şahin, Şahin!" to encourage the hero and make him rally his strength. Then, all the people join the child and cheer loudly "Şahin, Şahin!" The hero and all other men stop fighting. Şahin looks at the cheerful crowd as the camera pans over them. Then, a miracle happens. Şahin lets out a loud scream, and then knocks down about ten men in a few minutes.[19]

Sometimes, the gecekondu neighborhood as a whole is presented as if it was a fortress, a place of resistance as well as of vice and crime against the authority. In *The Man Without A Future*, right after the hero, Murat, kills a bad

[19] Although these momentary instances of collective action seem to contradict with the gecekondulu identity constructed all along, they usually take place very late in the story, and also they always arise through the intervention of the hero in the villain's attempt to demolish the houses. Therefore, these instances do not create a perception of the squatters' agency that would challenge the dominant ways in which these people are represented by the movies as lacking the ability to act on their own and in a consistent way.

rich man who has nothing to do the with the gecekondus, and runs away, we hear an announcement from the police radio: "The killer was last seen in a dark blue Renault automobile. He is expected to go to the gecekondus." However, it does not make sense to look for the runaway first in the gecekondu neighborhood, because Murat actually lives in a wealthy neighborhood. Besides, he has been in the gecekondu neighborhood only a few times so far, and has recently been sent away from the neighborhood by his friend who thinks that Murat is a bad role-model for the gecekondu children. Therefore, the reason why the police think that Murat will take refuge in the gecekondu neighborhood can only be explained by a widespread opinion on the gecekondus as a safe place for outlaws.

An upper-class perception of the urban poor as dangerous classes that established a link between crime and poverty was quite widespread in the 1960s and 1970s, which also resonated with the illegal status of these settlements. Although it is the villain (a representative of the rich class) that threatens the livelihood of the gecekondu people in popular movies, the other side of the coin, i.e. the upper-class view towards the urban poor as dangerous classes, is also mentioned sometimes. In *İbo and Güllüşah*, the protagonist says to his friend, a rich little girl, "my grandfather always told me to protect myself from the rich. The rich know neither how to love nor how to share. […] He said I should go to the poor if I were in trouble. The poor give you whatever they have." A few scenes later, the parents of the little girl think that their daughter has been kidnapped by him, although the audience knows that this is not the case. The parents do not know anything about the man other than that "he is a peasant-looking guy." The father says to the police "It has already been impossible to live in this city anymore. We have been surrounded by the gecekondus. They are coming from the villages; hungry, miserable, malcontent, umm, I can't even call them humans." The police chief replies: "Don't worry sir, we have been searching through the gecekondus." In the following scene, we see the police cars in the gecekondu neighborhood and the officers checking all gecekondu houses to find the little girl. Seeing the police all over the neighborhood, a young woman from the gecekondus says to her mother "You remember, don't you, that they raided here again just a few days ago upon an incident of robbery. If you are poor, if you came from a village, you are seen guilty by default no matter what." Similarly, in *Blood/Mad Kadir*, the rich girl complains to her friend about the villagers' invading İstanbul: "This city has become impossible to live in." These illustrations of an upper-class perception, which establishes a direct link between crime and poverty and uses gecekondu as the symbol of a social danger, underline further the poor/rich dichotomy in popular cinema as an unbridgeable gap, as something not merely an expression of difference, but also of hostility.

The moments of people's mobilization against the authority are not foregrounded at all in the demolition movies. They do not predominate in any way over the gecekondulu's representation throughout as weak and desperate actors who cannot mobilize on their own. So, the scenes of mobilization hardly invalidate the common perception of the gecekondulu as an unreliable group, one

that can be counted on in any project of social development or change. These moments rather reinforce the construction of an ambiguous gecekondulu identity, which can side with any ideological position as long as it gets a material benefit out of this cooperation. Perhaps the most striking example to this point is the final scene of *Mad Şahin*. We see the gecekondu people listening to the villain's (Abbas) speech in their neighborhood. Just in the previous scene these same people were cheering for the hero fighting the villain's men in order to protect the gecekondus. The people hold banners which say "Abbas, the guardian of the poor!" and "Abbas, our father!" Abbas's speech is frequently interrupted by applauding cries of the gecekondulu such as "Long live Abbas!", "May God protect Abbas!", "Father of the poor, thank you!" While Abbas is giving his speech, Şahin walks through the exhilarated crowd. Not a single person among the gecekondulu recognizes him. He just passes through them as if he was a ghost. While the hero goes out of sight on his way back to "his own world," he leaves behind the frantic gecekondulu showing their gratitude to the person whom the hero fought throughout the movie in order to save the gecekondus. This is the dominant image of the gecekondu people that the demolition movies, similar to the news reports and scholarly works from the 1970s, draw on and reproduce while constructing their own narratives of the urban poor: The gecekondu people lack any symbolic or ideological commitment, which makes them an ultimately unreliable, so dangerous, social group.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have examined how popular cinema in Turkey contributed to the construction of a gecekondulu identity in the 1970s. I have shown that although these popular narratives, just like their journalistic and theoretical counterparts, were symbolic constructions or fantasies about the reality, most of them added an additional layer of fantasy by featuring a quasi-superhero figure. Every component of his heroic identity widened the gap between this "fundamental fantasy figure" and the gecekondu people he protected. He took the initiative to beat the rich and powerful villains thanks to his extraordinary powers, which turned the gecekondu people into insignificant and unreliable actors of their own story.

The hegemonic perspective in the 1970s essentially blamed the victim, the urban poor, and expected them to transform so as to adapt to the social order. In that sense, the demolition movies can be regarded as counter-hegemonic narratives because they somehow challenged this hegemonic view by essentially blaming the order. This was partly a strategy to create a popular appeal among their lower class audience, and partly a result of increasing social concerns and heightened political mobilization in the society at large during this period. Whatever their motivation was, the popular movies saw the sovereigns of the existing order as the source of the social problems. However, they could not overcome the dilemma of how to position the gecekondu people, i.e. the very victims that they sided with, within their alternative vision or fantasy which would supposedly solve the problems. As an indication of this dilemma, the gecekondu people, although they were at the center of the story, were identified

in these narratives through a generic and vague term, *the people*, specified only through the images of children, and placed on the margins of the frame. The "little people" of popular films in the 1970s were basically the cinematic counterparts of the gecekondulu figure that was constructed by the dominant political and theoretical discourses in the fields of journalism and social research.

These films were usually shot on site, i.e. in the real gecekondu neighborhoods. It seems that the most problematic part of creating a fantasy world in a real setting was the question of how to fit the gecekondu people in the frame. It was mainly a story of the urban poor that the movies narrated, but these people hardly ever were at the center of action, i.e. the struggle between the rich's authority and a will power to challenge this authority. The real gecekondu residents were asked by the film makers to play who they were in reality. Obviously, however, this was a challenging question: Indeed, who were they in reality? Just as they did not know how to act properly in movies (i.e., they did not know the rules of symbolic act called role playing), there was also a social consensus on their lack of knowledge in how to act properly in real life (i.e., they were short of a symbolic capacity to be a part of modern urban society). That is why they occupied a peripheral position in popular cinema, similar to their marginalized position in the other fields of symbolic production. The filmic fantasies, just like their journalistic and theoretical counterparts, could not imagine them as having a positive identity or agency.

In parallel with a general lack of concern for the cultural representations of the urban poor all over the developing countries, there are very few studies on the cinematic representations of the gecekondulu in Turkey. Engin Yıldız's study (2008) is the only book that I am aware of which focuses exclusively on this topic. In his book, Yıldız supports one of my basic claims here: "Another cliché used in the gecekondu films is that the rich live in beautiful houses which contrast with the poor's gecekondus. The gecekondu people are goodhearted and naïve, and they need a powerful hero who would beat the rich. The gecekondu people cannot resist the rich villains on their own" (2008, p. 92). A later argument by Yıldız, however, runs counter to my analyses: "The people need a hero to get rid of their problems usually in the realist gecekondu films" (2008, p. 93). I think this is a very critical sentence although the author does not elaborate further on this point. Why does Yıldız consider the champion of the poor a realist figure?

I find Yıldız's statement paradoxical because not only in Turkey but also in the popular cinema elsewhere the savior-hero is considered, in McGowan's words, a "fundamental fantasy figure" (2007, p. 145). The problem with Yıldız is that instead of taking the popular cinema as one of the sites where a gecekondulu identity is constructed, he regards the recurrent representations of the gecekondulu on the big screen simply as reflections of these people's essential identity. Yet, he is not alone in that. In fact, there is a general tendency in all fields of symbolic production, including the academic studies and all over the developing world, to ignore the cultural processes behind the construction of a pervasive image of the urban poor as non-ideological actors. Yıldız makes his

paradoxical comment because in his idea the gecekondulu really need a hero (or an authority/leading figure) since they have no agency of their own. In other words, the reality of the gecekondu people, according to this widespread idea, is marked by their need for a fantasmatic support from outside. In fact, Yıldız clarifies this point very well in the conclusion of his book: "The gecekondu people have no abilities (i.e., no cultural capacity, intelligence, own ideals or utopias) that would lead them to 'adventurous journeys'" (2008, p. 197). Interestingly, in his article about representations of tha gecekondus in Turkish cinema, Mehmet Öztürk (2004) also makes the exact same argument by using almost the same words (note that there is no reference to Öztürk in Yıldız's sentence above). That is why, this argument would go on to say, the gecekondulu need to jump in somebody else's wagon to participate in the "adventurous journeys" of social development or transformation. Yet, what complicates this picture is that the gecekondu people do not quite fit in these wagons. There are many routes mapped out differently that would lead the society to a better future. And, the conductors of all these different wagons think that these people put their journey at risk.

The gecekondulu identity was perhaps one of the very few issues that all political, theoretical, and popular frameworks with conflicting ideological orientations agreed on in Turkey in the 1970s. And this is where its significance lies: The gecekondulu identity, regardless of how the actual gecekondu people behaved politically in any given situation, challenged the authoritative position or claims of any symbolic framework by transgressing its inevitably limited, biased, and also restrictive conceptual boundaries. Thereby, this unconventional social formation stood in the way of any ideology's need to rejustify and reproduce its own position. I think, what the gecekondulu put at risk was perhaps not the safety of the society's journey towards future, but the safety of the established frameworks that claimed authority over how to know and manipulate this process. That is why, I would argue, instead of taking the risk and burden of questioning their own boundaries or limitations, every ideological position showed a defensive reflex by marginalizing the gecekondulu identity. At the very least, this was a major part of the story of how an identity of the urban poor came about in Turkey.

The perception of the gecekondulu as ideological nomads, unable to undertake socio-political initiative in their own right, has persisted to this day. The gecekondu and its inhabitants are still loaded with many negative connotations related to this perception, such as subversiveness, opportunism, pragmatism, ignorance, backwardness, disloyalty, and incompetence. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to critically evaluate the development of the attitudes towards the gecekondu phenomenon in Turkey, which requires much closer attention to cultural representations of the urban poor than they have received so far. This article is an attempt to make a contribution to this effort.

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