

The Pandemic State of Emergency as a Reading Guide of Notable Absences in the Urban Class Society of Istanbul¹

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The Berlin Conference “We, The City. Plurality and Resistance in Berlin and Istanbul” back in 2019 took place in a vibrant environment of exchange and comparison. It deserved its title and exemplified a clear orientation towards engaged research on and for urban justice and equality:

“Who are we, the city? Can we find the elements of an egalitarian democratic imaginary and a non-hegemonic conception of ‘we’ by thinking the instances of resistance in Berlin and Istanbul together? How do residents of Berlin and Istanbul experience, express, and resist the physical, political and normative reordering of their cities? Over the course of three days, we invite practitioners and theorists of the urban—activists, cultural producers, and scholars alike—to explore various forms of knowledge production through moderated talks, panels, and installations.”²

The invitation was well received, and there was a consistency between the contents discussed, questions of the research presented, and the forms in which the discussions evolved. Looking back on those face-to-face social moments of engaged research exchange, it seems as if not only years passed but a qualitatively entirely new period has evolved between now and then. In fact, the pandemic lockdown that slowed down direct social interaction in both cities confirmed the relevancy of the research questions that the conference had set itself as a task to tackle, often overshadowed in the ‘normalised course of urban interactions’. For example, in our comparative panel with Stefania Animento, our aim was

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1 This article is based on an expanded and significantly modified version of the following two articles. The author would like to thank the editors of both articles and the translator of the latter: 1. “Keeping the Wheels Turning at all Costs: Factories as COVID-19 Clusters—Interview with Aslı Odman”. *TRAFO—Blog for Transregional Research*, 10 August 2021. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/30605> (edited by Görkem Akgöz, Nurçin Ileri, Malak Labib, Natasha Klimenko); 2. Odman, Aslı. 2020. “The exceptional state of the pandemic policies: Working Citizens”. *saha*, December, Special Issue 3, edited by Fırat Genç, translated from Turkish into English by Yeşim Öztaracı, 52–60.

2 Excerpt from the self-description of the conference at: <https://wethecity.info/wethecity2019/wethecity/www.wethecity.info/index.html>. Accessed 1 August 2022.

to make visible the production sphere behind the thick curtains of private property and labour as its main agent in those two cities.³ In this panel, one of Animento's and my main thesis was that the analysis of working life is underrepresented and overshadowed both in urban research and journalistic activity, and even in the everyday narratives of the working participants of the city, according to the motto, 'Don't bring work home, right?'. Yet we focused on everyday practices—including resistances—and the 'hidden injuries'⁴ of the 'citi-zen'⁵ as worker in contrast to the 'citi-zen' as consumer, 'citi-zen' in public spaces etc. How does the naturalisation of working life as the 'second nature' of cities and the inequalities it causes facilitate the reproduction of urban class societies? Where and how can we see and sense this process of naturalisation and de-historicisation of urban tensions and the discourses about them? In our understanding, this perpetuation mainly passes through the invisibilisation of workspaces from the hegemonic "We's" constructed in representations of the city in official and public discourses. Thus, the urging aim of our panel was to shed light on how renewed class realities are constructed in and between the workspaces, including homes as the space of reproductive labour linked to the former by ways of commuting.

We wanted to reflect upon the meaning and role of one's work and labour in general in city residents' lives: what does invisibility of labour mean? How can we trace this invisibility, which is a paradoxical task in itself? What is the relevance and epistemology of making labour visible in the city today? What are the relationships between the ones who produce commodities in the cities and the ones who are reproduced/

3 The title of the joint panel held on 23 May 2019 was "We, the Invisible Hours, Spaces and Relations of the City: Labouring Istanbul, Labouring Berlin". The title of the paper Stefania Animento presented was "Making Labour Visible in Berlin: Exploitation at the Nexus between Work and Play". There she focused on the flourishing service and IT sectors in the platform economies of Berlin and the grassroots organisations of the new workers controlled by an algorithmic time and space management. For an overview, see: Altenried, Moritz, Stefania Animento, and Manuela Bojadžijev. 2021. "Plattform-Urbanismus. Arbeit, Migration und die Transformation des urbanen Raums". *sub \ urban. zeitschrift für kritische stadtforschung* 9 (1/2), 73–92.

4 Here I refer to the 1972 book by Richard Sennett / Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Austin: Gold Books), stressing the term 'hidden' in connection with the widespread invisibility of labour in the reflections on the city. In their seminal book based on qualitative interviews with relatively lower-class workers of that period—yet with a secure job and income—in Boston, the authors masterfully displayed the everyday experiences of workers in a hierarchically structured city, how this makes them feel, and how they make sense of those feelings. One of the coping mechanisms of this everyday urban tension is dividing the self between the identity attached to the urban citizen through work and the 'real self'. In this dualism, home and consumption around home-making becomes the place of the self-esteem and internal freedom of the 'real self'. Yet functions and performances accomplished in workplaces are pushed to the background as a defence mechanism since they come with a sense of submissiveness, lack of autonomy and creativity, injured dignity, and individual failure for which only the worker carries the responsibility in the discursive order. Therefore, introversion to oneself, individualism, consumerism, and attachment to one's home and urban leisure have to do with the working life in an indirect and even more powerful manner.

5 Here I opt for the neologism 'citi-zen' instead of 'citizen' to underline the social tissue of the city as the imprint of the spatialised class conflict and to contrast it with a, *by definition*, space-less national identity.

represented in the brand images of the cities?⁶ What are the concrete workplaces behind the very much propagated images of shiny and fun workplaces of IT start-ups, cultural industries, and smart cities? To make our reflections tangible, we tried to set out an epistemological basis for a comparison between Istanbul and Berlin in terms of a spatialised focus on new workspaces. Mushrooming construction sites of infrastructure mega-projects was the main case for Istanbul as highly location-based yet volatile workspaces. The fluid and algorithmically controlled workspaces created by the new platform urbanism (gastronomy, call centres, and delivery services) was the counterpart for Berlin.⁷ Those ‘rescaled’ workspaces in both cities were nurtured by young, gendered, and mostly migrant workers on whom work imposed effects of atomisation and deskilling, long working hours, less than a living, often minimum wage, lack of conventional organisation, and increased risks regarding health and safety at work.

Capital organised in and between the myriad scales alongside the global commodity chains transcends urban spaces and turns them into abstract spaces⁸ of production for profit. Labour, in turn, is confined to social spaces of production, which are centred around the workspace with its commuting and living spaces. These are lived routes constituting chaotic—unless organised—networks, where ‘citi-zens as workers’ circulate, accumulating experiences of making a living, inequality, adverse effects on their health, psyche, and dignity. Labour, as opposed to abstract urban capital, is always a location-based practice. Workplaces are therefore not simple boxes where working life prescribed from above ‘plays out’.

The (brand) images of and about the metropolises are also always structured, thus ‘class-based’ and ‘class-ified’ images, obscuring further those splintered, unclassified moments of production experiences. Efforts to make labour visible in the city are looking at the latent, slow shifts underlying the ‘planetary urbanization’⁹ that have consequences for

6 For an earlier discussion on the social restructuring of the discourses on Istanbul contrasted with the evolution of the labouring world, see: Odman, Asli. 2015. “Reflections on the Panel ‘Working Poor or Working Deprived in Cool Istanbul’”. *Cool Istanbul. Urban Enclosures and Resistances*, edited by Derya Özkan, translated from Turkish by Funda Özokçu, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 61–78.

7 Altenried, Moritz, Stefania Animento, and Manuela Bojadžijev. 2021. “Plattform-Urbanismus. Arbeit, Migration und die Transformation des urbanen Raums”. *sub\urban. zeitschrift für kritische stadtforschung* 9 (1/2), 73–92.

8 ‘Abstract space’ is the outcome of the ordering, quantifying, measuring of space and linked to the concept of ‘conceived space’ in the spatial triad by Henri Lefebvre. It is the inevitable by-product of capital accumulation processes, which is the main motor behind the ‘place’–‘space’ tension. For further information, see: Merryfield, Andy. 2006. *Henry Lefebvre. A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

9 The term ‘planetary urbanization’ signifies the recent change in the perspective of urban studies which defies the former urban-rural divide and city-centric epistemologies. Decentering the ‘real existing’ administrative urban borders, it is an invitation for looking at multi-scalar entanglements between workspaces and territories of resources, on spatial fixation, accumulation by dispossession, and on how the globalised capital accumulation has pushed towards implosion and explosion to produce more but dispersed urban fabric. For more on the operationalisation of the concept, see: Brenner, Neil and Christian Schmid. 2014. “Planetary Urbanization”. *Implosions and Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, edited by Neil Brenner, Berlin: jovis Verlag, 160–64.

a much vaster territory than the metropolis itself. It might be necessary to point to another cleavage that needs to be taken into account between labour as a socio-spatial process and the items on the agenda of single trade unions as its self-proclaimed representatives. Needless to say, the approach taken here opts for the first one and distances itself from ‘trade union fetishism’¹⁰ when caring for the ‘representation of labour in the planetary city’, especially during ‘long times of drought’ when it does not ‘stage itself in the urban present and history’ in the form of organised and visible movements and demands.

The contrast between the shiny images of the ‘cool cities Istanbul and Berlin’ and the obscure/d everyday working realities is striking and bears both political and methodological paradoxes and backlashes: everyday work of the labourer ‘secretes’ the social tissue of the city, yet remains ‘secret’ to the ‘public opinion’, made invisible inside the realms of the privately owned workspaces. Yet in two instances the veil of invisibility is broken: death or resistance of the worker.

In my talk in Berlin, I tried to apply this ambitious research framework, which strives to make labour in the cities visible, although only little by little. On that occasion, I had to limit the talk to the howling construction sites in Istanbul, the economic capital of an almost unrestricted conservative-liberal accumulation regime. Though the construction sector may have slowed down during the pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis, it has not lost its backing by the ever-expanding neo-populist regime, the emergency laws granting the construction companies exceptions to build and expand, its disproportionate share in work-related deaths and in the destruction of the ecosystems. Striving to make the labour on the numerous scattered construction sites visible, I focused on two instances when the construction workers become visible: first, when they die, and second, when they resist and protest.

Back in June 2019, my focus was further narrowed down to the biggest mega-project Istanbul had ever witnessed: the third airport.¹¹ Data of work-related fatal accidents in Istanbul compiled by the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch since 2011¹² clearly showed that construction workers had one

10 Atzeni, Maurizio. 2021. “Workers’ organizations and the fetishism of the trade union form: toward new pathways for research on the labour movement?” *Globalizations* 18 (8): 1349–62.

11 Odman, Aslı. 2019. “Third Airport of Istanbul/Turkey: Assault against Human Life, Ecosystem, Urban Heritage and Public Finance”. Paper presented for the Fact Finding Committee of the International Trade Union Confederation, 25 March. https://www.academia.edu/39798654/Third_Airport_of_Istanbul_Turkey_Assault_against_Human_Life_Ecosystem_Urban_Heritage_and_Public_Finance. Accessed 3 August 2022.

12 For the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch, see: “Turkey: Unions and campaigners stand up to murder at work”. *Hazards Magazine* 144, 2008. <https://www.hazards.org/workingworld/workiswar.htm>. Accessed 3 August 2022: “In 2007, a network of progressive academics, journalists, lawyers, doctors and engineers joined forces with workers and trade unionists and labour organisers to set up a joint campaign and to fund investigations into why so many workers were being killed in the country’s shipbuilding and repair yards. The network now funds a coordinator to campaign across all sectors in Turkey. It carries out painstaking research, scanning local and national, print and online media on a daily basis, compiling and publishing monthly updates and the annual Report on work murders”.

of the highest mortality rates while making a living in Istanbul. I separated the data on construction workers of the third airport from the data on all fatal workplace accidents and compared this ‘necro-political’ data¹³ with the demands of the wildcat strike right ahead of the ceremonial opening on Republic Day, on 29 October 2018.¹⁴ During the five-year construction process, at least 52 workers died, but the demands of the wildcat strike did not prioritise the ‘right to live’. The long list of demands mainly comprised, firstly, basic economic rights like full and timely payment of wages, no arbitrary dismissals and, secondly, improvement of the daily working conditions, which the workers spontaneously and unanimously described as ‘attacks against their dignity’, like a bed-bug infestation in workers’ sleeping quarters, bad and cold food, overcrowded workers’ transportation services in which they were transported ‘like livestock’. The living wage and living dignity thus took precedence over the right to live, which was clearly violated by the working conditions established for the around 30,000 workers employed with dozens of different subcontractors over those five years. In my talk, I dealt with this puzzling relationship between the two types of rare ‘public opinion’ visibility of labour in our cities, branded with cool images on the ‘smart’, high-tech, and sterile renders. I kept asking whether a holistic representation, social mapping of the myriad workplaces and the living element that kept them going was possible. And what this would imply for the methodological conventions of urban studies we were sticking to. These questions lurked in the research I pursued in the following years, to be faced again in the situation of urban emergency triggered by the pandemic.

Becoming Visible when Labour Stages Itself on the Urban Scene

Back to today, March 2022, this article is being penned amidst a period of an intensive, unexpected wave of strikes.¹⁵ More wildcat strikes effectively stopping production took place in the first two months of 2022 than during the whole of 2020.

- 13 Presidency Communication Center (CIMER). 2018. “52 Deadly Occupational Accidents Occur in Construction of 3rd Istanbul Airport”. *bianet*, 3 December. <https://bianet.org/english/labor/203151-52-workers-lose-their-lives-in-construction-of-3rd-airport-in-5-years>. Accessed 3 August 2022.
- 14 Sinclair-Webb, Emma. 2008. “Construction Workers At Turkey’s New Airport Jailed For Protesting Work Conditions”. *Human Rights Watch Bulletin*, 21 September. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/21/construction-workers-turkeys-new-airport-jailed-protesting-work-conditions>. Accessed 3 August 2022.
- 15 Birelma, Alpkan. 2022. “Is Labor Making a Comeback in Turkey. The 2022 Strike Wave in Turkey”. *Cambridge Core blog*, 2 March. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/blog/2022/03/02/is-labor-making-a-comeback-the-2022-strike-wave-in-turkey/>. Accessed 3 August 2022.

Istanbul and its wider productive hinterland was the number one strike hub, followed by Gaziantep, the textile hub, and the province of Izmir, dominated by the resistance of ship recycling workers.¹⁶ In Istanbul, striking delivery workers at Yemeksepeti, acquired by Berlin-based Delivery Hero, are tearing down the company's consumer-oriented brand image by laying bare wages below subsistence level, outsourced death risks hidden behind the 'solo-employment' status, and systematic mobbing. The warehouse workers of another city-maker image brand, Migros—Turkey's largest supermarket chain—are organised to claim decent wages and dignity and emerge victorious in a struggle without being backed by previous collective bargaining rights. Sock workers, whose mass existence is only marginally covered by working class dailies under 'normal conditions', make their grievances at their workplaces heard in the general urban public. And most of the striking workers do so without the backing of traditional formal unions but stage themselves in the urban public spaces and spheres. These brief impressions of struggle make visible the everyday conditions, routes, inequalities of 'citizens as workers', who are also for the moment a latent, not apparently resisting part of the 'citizens as workers' and the labouring city as a social space.

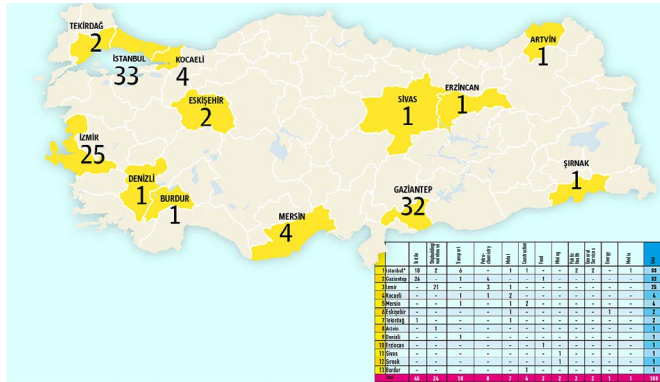


FIG. 1: Distribution of wildcat strikes by provinces. Report on the 2022 Strike Wave (2022 Grev Dalgası) by the Labour Studies Group (Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu) and Evrensel Newspaper, March 2022. Translated by Aslı Odman.

16 For a strike map by industry and workplaces, see the interactive map of the daily newspaper Evrensel: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/454269/turkiyenin-dort-bir-yaninda-2022de-baslayan-devam-eden-isci-eylemlerinin-haritasi.03>. Accessed 3 August 2022.

Becoming Visible when Workers Die en Masse

These insights also make visible the everyday ‘state of emergency’ of the ‘citizens as workers’, which is naturalised/normalsed behind the billboard images of the city. According to the reports and calculations of the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch, at least around 20 to 30 people die in Turkey every day due to work-related reasons, mainly because of work, the way they work, the conditions under which they work (workplace accidents, occupational diseases, or work-related suicides), out of a population of around 85 million people and a workforce of around 32 million (around 49%), with an official informality rate of 29% and the widely defined unemployment rate of 22% by November 2021, with 99,9% of enterprises being SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises)—1 to 250 workers—, employing 76% of the workforce and responsible for around 80% of workplace accidents, which are related to bigger holding companies through supply and commodity chains.¹⁷ Only a minor fraction of those work-related deaths are officially registered. And the majority of them take place in Istanbul and its wider productive hinterland, described as a city region.

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There is a clear linear relationship between ‘development’ and death. More accelerated capital accumulation/‘growth’ in a sector invariably leads to more fatalities and injuries at work in this sector. This is why the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch tends to refer to the current economic system as ‘accumulation by work-related deaths’. In the more rapidly expanding/deepening sectors there are more, repeated, accelerated deaths but also more urbanicide and environmental destruction. This type of capital accumulation stresses the integrity and longevity of the body both of the worker and the ecosystem beyond vital biological limits. Clear examples from Istanbul for this linear and fatal relationship are, first, the shipbuilding region in Tuzla, Istanbul’s easternmost district, which experienced a boom in global demand for new ships back in 2007; second, the construction sector throughout the period; third, the TV series sector, which became a Turkish export commodity, using Istanbul as a movie set reproducing only its cool images; and last but not least in the death toll among health, education, municipal, delivery, warehouse, and market workers whose essential work made survival in the cities during the pandemic possible at the ‘unrecognised’ expense of longer and more intensive work, increased social risks, and systematic negligence of their occupational health and safety by employers. Dozens of workers routinely die during ordinary everyday production

17 World Bank Labour Force Statistics on Turkey. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=TR>. Accessed 8 February 2022.

at their workplace. This situation is in fact the real state of emergency of the ‘citizens as workers’ and is pushed towards invisibility. This invisible real state of emergency is further aggravated by the state of emergencies initiated both by the political regime in 2016 and by the pandemic in 2020.

Discovering the Cartographies of Disease¹⁸ Two Years after the Initial Research for Visibility

Two years after those first attempts at tracing the everyday state of emergency and the lethal production of Istanbul by the ‘citizens as workers’ behind its invasive marketed images, the state of emergency triggered by the pandemic offered—paradoxically enough—a new window to make visible urban class society and its spaces.¹⁹

The pandemic not only unveiled the already existing social inequalities but also aggravated them. Sociologists of health have long been addressing the social determinants of health and life expectancy, so this did not come as a surprise to researchers working on inequalities arising from how, where, and when one works in a capitalist society, i.e. the class position. Yet social inequalities produced in spaces where capitalism reproduces itself—that is, primarily in physical workspaces—and inequalities based on socio-professional activity were neglected in terms of data-sharing and pandemic policies in most countries. This is especially true if we exclude some bits of information that exposed otherwise obscure areas. For example, these were either very salient, visible COVID-19 workplace clusters, like care homes, hospitals, and slaughterhouses, or resistance clusters voicing out loud the health inequalities during the pandemic, such as those that occurred in warehouses and organised industry zones, among other locations. In Turkey, however, we can speak of a total eclipse of the discourse on and politics against workplace risks, which in fact constitutes a continuity with the pre-pandemic attitude of state, corporations, and other ideological apparatuses, like the press or academia towards the working world.

As far as the impact of the pandemic specifically on industrial workers is concerned, we should talk about two different types of relations. In doing so, we should first of all

18 Koch, Tom. 2005. *Cartographies of Disease. Maps, Mapping and Medicine*, Redlands CA: ESRI Press; Patino, Marie. 2020. “Coronavirus Outbreak Maps Rooted in History”. *Bloomberg CityLab Design*, 11 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-11/coronavirus-outbreak-maps-rooted-in-history>. Accessed 3 August 2022.

19 This part of the article is a shortened and revised version of: “Keeping the Wheels Turning at all Costs: Factories as COVID-19 Clusters—Interview with Aslı Odman”, *TRAFÖ—Blog for Transregional Research*, 10 August 2021. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/30605>. Accessed 3 August 2022.

distinguish between the scales of industrial work. From largest to smallest, these include organised industrial zones (which sometimes take the shape of special production zones, free zones, etc.), factories, workshops, small informal units (which are attached to housing units called “under-the-counter workshops”), artisanal units, homes, and streets.

Firstly, large-scale industrial workplaces were important COVID-19 clusters. When employers failed to meet the increased demands for workers’ health and safety measures during the pandemic, these industrial workplaces became superspreader spaces and public health problems. This was mainly due to the large numbers of workers toiling, eating, and moving alongside each other with little or no distance, and going to work every day using public transportation, crowded especially along the commuting routes. In Turkey, no data was kept and shared on the infection rates at workplaces, on COVID-19 workplace clusters, or regarding socio-professional backgrounds—that is, the *cursus laboris* (or work history) of infected or deceased people. Workplaces and capitalist working relations of different sectors and scales were systematically kept invisible, which quickly became one of the reasons of the accelerating spread of the disease. The acute lack of measures to protect workers’ health and safety was translated into severe public health negligence. The state didn’t view and keep data on workplaces and did not allow or facilitate local governments or civil society organisations to do so, so its policies were not directed towards these large-scale sources of infection. As a result, the population close to industrial workers—such as their families, people they shared public facilities with, or people who lived next to or within those production facilities—suffered because the chain of transmission was not cut off at the start of the spreads. Similarly, non-essential lines of industrial production were not stopped by measures such as compensating workers from public funds set aside for states of emergency. Instead, “keep the wheels turning at all costs!” was the motto of the corporatocratic regime.

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Secondly, most medium and small-sized industrial workplaces are not separated from central residential areas in Turkish metropolises. Rather, they are tightly interwoven into the urban fabric. Despite their smaller size, their proximity to all age segments of the urban population made them an additional type of superspreader.

To give a concrete example, let’s illustrate a few relevant aspects of Istanbul’s industrial landscape. The city accommodates millions of employees working in nearly 15,000 different formal business units registered with the Istanbul Chamber of Industry. This includes the Tuzla Shipbuilding Zone, nearly 20 Organised Industrial Zones, and Small Industrial Areas (five in Tuzla, three in Ümraniye, Küçükçekmece, and Büyükçekmece), and three Free Zones, where thousands of people work side by side every day. Thousands of poorly ventilated, sometimes windowless, formal, informal, or semi-formal workshops, flats, and under-the-counter businesses in the neighbourhoods near the two highways that crisscross the city form an

important part of the urban landscape. Workers have to work side by side to make a living and to turn the “wheel of debt bondage”²⁰ at the pace of capital accumulation not only in industrial workplaces but also in hundreds of ports, depots, warehouses, and logistics centres established to continuously feed, clothe, and supply raw materials to Istanbul, a massive space of production and consumption.

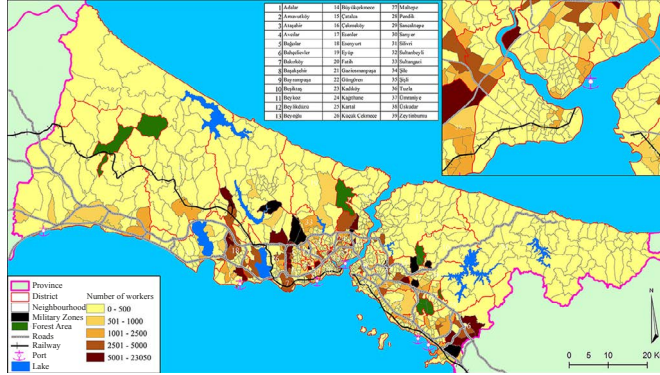


FIG. 2: A map of the number of workers at industrial workplaces based on 2014 data from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and created by Kadir Temurçin and Yolcu Aldırmaz in 2017. The yellow to brown colour spectrum signifies the increasing numbers of workers in the respective neighbourhoods (grey contours) in Istanbul’s 39 districts. Translated by Aslı Odman.

When looking at the specifics of workspaces, both of the following constellations increase the risk of spreading the virus. It could either be more than 50 workers commuting and working in the same workplace every day, or a concentration of workspaces with less than 50 workers but situated in dense urban areas and located within housing units, such as apartment buildings. For a general overview of “labouring Istanbul”, we should keep in mind that there are 5.5 million formal workers in the city, with 350,000 of them being public servants and 600,000 being self-employed. The overall rate of those working from home in Turkey is calculated to be 25 percent at most. Although this rate might be true for Istanbul, it means that more than 4 million people work “without the

20 The indebtedness of private households in Turkey is one of the highest on OECD average. The basic needs of millions of income earners are met by what is called ‘turning the credit cards’, taking out credits to have enough to eat, clothe, send the children to school, and pay for transport. These credits, which can never be fully paid back under the prevailing economic conditions, form a kind of bondage that prevents the workers from resisting life-endangering and undecent conditions of work, “selling themselves into coercive labor markets”. This is what I call ‘wheel of debt bondage’, a renewed debt bondage of the type we know from the proto-capitalistic periods. LeBaron, Genevieve. 2014. “Reconceptualizing Debt Bondage: Debt as a Class-Based Form of Labor Discipline”. *Critical Sociology* 40 (5). For the context in Turkey, see: Karaçimen, Elif. 2015. *Türkiye’de Finansallaşma. Borç Kışkıracındaki Emek* [Financialization in Turkey. Labour in the Grip of Debt] Sav Publishing; Güngen, Ali Reza. 2021. *Borçlandırma Siyaseti. Türkiye’de Finansal İçerilme* [Politics of Indebtness. Financial Inlining in Turkey]. İletişim Publishing.

luxury of staying at home”, and a significant number of them work in conditions that cause the pandemic to spread faster. At least 40 percent of the formally employed—that is, nearly 1,720,000 workers in the city—work in a total of 10,000 businesses employing more than 50 workers.²¹ This was and still is a massive category of potential COVID-19 clusters that were not registered or accounted for, and for which no policy was developed.

During the pandemic, the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch has documented other violations of workers’ rights beyond the right to health. At some well-known, globally producing, and established factories (e.g., in the food and metal sector, i.e., Vestel Electronics owned by the Zorlu Holding or the Dardanel canned food factory) and on (mega-infrastructure) construction sites (i.e., of Limak Inc.), workers were literally locked in at their workplace. Their freedom of movement was restricted to keep the production process going. In the case of the Dardanel food company, workers were forced to reside in nearby vacated student dormitories or construction site containers, otherwise they were threatened with dismissal—to name just one of the illegal enforcement methods. Healthy workers replaced the ill ones and worked longer hours and harder to keep production at pre-pandemic levels.²²

There is also a perfect continuity from the pre-pandemic to the pandemic period in recognising occupational diseases. Here, there is a policy of non-policy, systematic ignorance, and the active invisibilisation of the relation between disease and work. Despite the general difficulties in recognising occupational diseases throughout capitalist countries, we have reliable estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) stating that deaths due to occupational diseases occur approximately six times more often than deaths from work accidents.²³ Since 2011, the Istanbul Health and Safety Labour Watch has been documenting deaths from occupational accidents, recording at least around 2,000 deaths per year. In other words, despite the fact that—according to the most conservative estimate—10,000-12,000 employees lose their lives every year due to occupational diseases in Turkey, no one seems to have died from an occupational disease between 2013 and 2019 according to the official statistics by the Turkish Social Security Institute SGK! Figures before 2013 rarely exceed 10 fatalities. Another reliable estimate²⁴ is that at least 10 percent of those who die from cancer each year die from occupational

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21 Odman, Aslı. 2020. “The exceptional state of the pandemic policies: Working Citizens”. *saha*, December, Special Issue 3, edited by Fırat Genç, translated from Turkish into English by Yeşim Öztarakçı, 52–60.

22 “Keeping the Wheels Turning at all Costs: Factories as COVID-19 Clusters—Interview with Aslı Odman”. 2021. *TRAFO—Blog for Transregional Research*, 10 August, edited by Görkem Akgöz, Nurçin Ileri, Malak Labib, and Natasha Klimenko. <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/30605>. Accessed 3 August 2022.

23 World Health Organization. 2008. *The global burden of disease: 2004 update*. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43942>.

24 Pandey, Kaushal Raj. 2007. “Occupational cancer kills more than 200,000 people a year”. *BMJ*, 5 May; 334 (7600): 925.

cancers. More than 13,000 occupational cancer deaths should have been recorded, but the official figure is “zero”. Getting sick because of work is an area that the capitalist regime in Turkey pushed into invisibility. The burden of proving that the disease is linked to the working conditions legally lies with the workers, who are thus placed against the big bureaucratic social security machine they can never overcome to prove that their disease is linked to their work. It is as if there are no peasants or seasonal agricultural, factory, mine, and shipyard workers who come in contact with toxic materials, dust, pesticides, or inhumanly long working hours and work pressure on a daily basis during their entire working life. These structural limits were reinforced during the pandemic. Under public pressure in the face of serial losses of health personnel²⁵, the Ministry of Health was pushed to issue a special circular concerning only the health personnel in December 2020 as to how to recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease. But even this hasn’t changed the basic traits of the system. The infection or death of a health worker is not automatically accepted as an occupational disease. Even the family of a nurse who dies while working in a pandemic hospital is expected to prove that she was infected while working (and not while resting at home). Thus the burden of proof is placed on the employees or, if they have died, on their family. At the moment, only a few cases among the hundreds were won by families of diseased healthcare workers, who had to go to court for this (four official recognitions of the death of health personnel as of 2020, according to the latest data available). Meanwhile, all other actively working parts of society—millions of essential workers, like couriers, teachers, cashiers, and warehouse and factory labourers—who fell ill or lost their lives did not seek official recognition of their occupational disease because of the practical impossibility and a lack of support and organisation for such an endeavour.

Due to the economic crisis that accompanied the health crisis, there was also a series of dismissals and practices of forced unpaid leave, which further weakened the already low organised power of the collective resistance of industrial workers in Turkey.²⁶ However, the fragmented workers’ resistances did not lose pace or frequency but rather increased during the pandemic. The wheels of the economy kept turning, as did the fragmented resistances of the workers. A small but significant part of the mass of formal and informal workers (mainly refugees, women, and children) who could not “stay home” did not stay at their workplaces despite curfews and

25 According to the records of the Turkish Medical Association, 552 health workers died due to a COVID-19 infection in the first two years of the pandemic. TTB, “Pandemi Sürecinde Türkiye’de Sağlık Çalışanı Ölümlerinin Anlattığı’ Güncellenmiş İkinci Yıl Sonu Raporu Yayınlandı”. 29 April 2022. https://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=93f4f220-c786-11ec-8bef-40694c436a49. Accessed 3 August 2022.

26 [Covid-19 Labour Rights Violations Monitoring Group. 2021. “From Closing to Opening—Labour Rights Violations during Covid-19 (11 March–31 May 2020)”. *Despite the Pandemic. Selections From 2020–2021 Kocaeli Solidarity Academy Events*], edited by Hülya Kendir, Hakan Koçak, and M. Ruhi Demiray. KODA Yayınları, 156–87.

local bans on rallies, but interrupted the production processes, protested their dismissals, and reclaimed their rights in terms of work, severance, and accident payments, workers health and safety, and unionisation in several sectors, like healthcare, municipal services, mining, retail trade, construction, gastronomy, tourism, metal and electronics, garment, warehouses, energy, communication and post, and transportation. New independent workers' organisations were formed among the urban workforce, among others also under the umbrella of "Solidarity of Urban Workers".²⁷ This included workers in places like cafés, bars, malls, restaurants, in the delivery and tourism sectors, private universities, and schools. The lethargy and a lack of dynamism of established unions' communication channels empowered social media as a medium for the expression of workers' culture and resistances,²⁸ even though

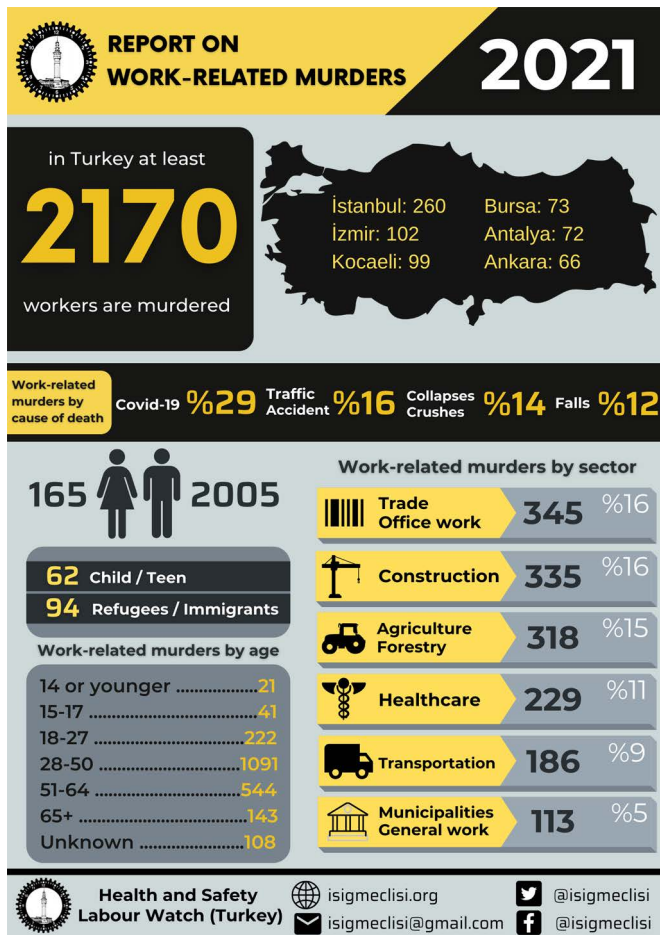


FIG. 3: Report on work-related murders for 2021. Source: Health and Safety Labour Watch, Turkey.

27 Kent Emekçileri Dayanışması [Solidarity of Urban Workers] under @emekcilerikent on Twitter.

28 İnce, Elif. 2021. "I felt I existed in this world': TikTok gives a voice to Turkey's labourers". *The Guardian*, 24 July. www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/24/tiktok-gives-voice-turkey-labourers-factory-workers. Accessed 3 August 2022.

this medium was dispersed. Retrospectively, we detect that those slow and dispersed struggles prepared the wave of strikes in early 2022.

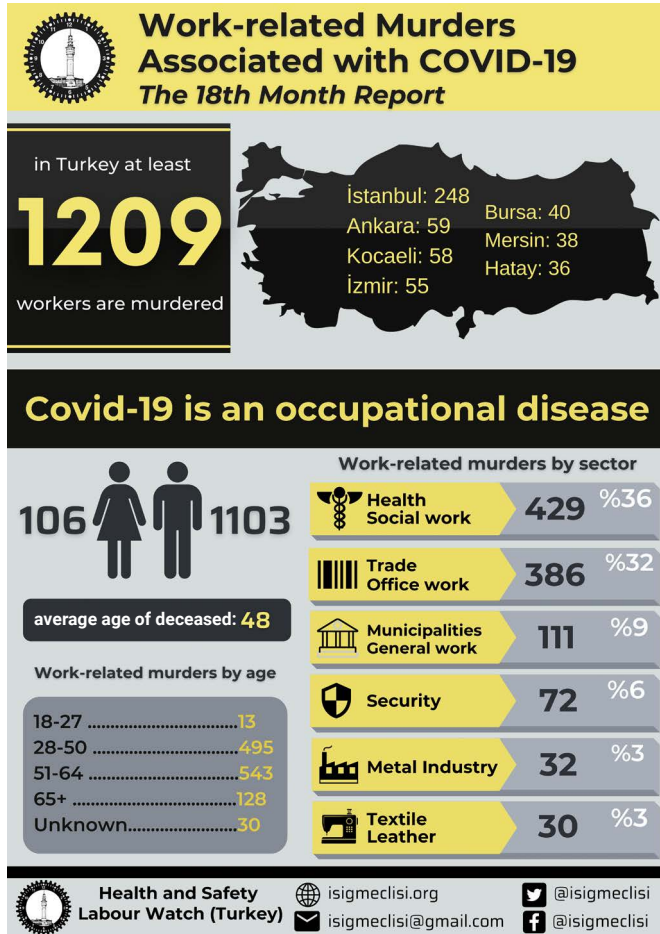


FIG. 4: Report on work-related murders for the first 18 months of the pandemic. Source: Health and Safety Labour Watch, Turkey.

A Social Cartographic Attempt at Circumventing the Lack of Data on Workplaces

The much-lamented lack of transparency in the sharing of pandemic data should be seen in the light of the structural invisibility of the conditions of living and dying of the ‘citizens as workers’. The lack of transparency during a pandemic is not only a problem for record keeping, but it is also indicative of a lack of accountability and appropriate pandemic policies, which costs thousands of lives. These lives

are among the most vulnerable populations, like refugees, people who live on daily incomes, unemployed women caring for their family, and workers squeezed into workplaces.

The data shared by the Turkish Ministry of Health that served as the basis for the public pandemic policy only contained aggregated and under-documented figures, without differentiating according to relevant micro-administrative scales, such as districts and neighbourhoods, gender, age, income groups, occupational groups or sectors, workplaces, ethnicity, educational opportunities obtained, accompanying diseases, disease symptoms, and risk groups. A second form of publicly accessible information was a mobile phone application called HES, which vaguely showed infection rates in the form of a heat map. This was, however, based on the residences of infected people. Both data categories excluded the importance of COVID-19 workplace clusters and the socio-professional factors for the risk of infection.

Confronted with this blatant absence, Murat Tülek, an urban researcher and planner, and I created social maps.²⁹ Murat Tülek superimposed the heat maps with the groundbreaking market value+age group distribution map of Istanbul updated in 2020³⁰ and a map of the distribution of industrial workplaces in Istanbul.³¹ We were able to make some spatial analyses about the perfect invisibility of large-scale, isolated industrial areas and the relative safe havens of gated communities, which allow mainly educated middle and upper-middle class people working from home to “introvert into class”. The third cluster of analysis concerned the urban areas in the European part of the city, where light industry, including the garment industry, is mainly situated.

The neighbourhoods where small and medium-sized businesses and dwellings are nested without any distance or differentiation between them have never ceased to be hubs of continuous infection. In neighbourhoods where small-scale businesses (mainly textile, metalwork, chemical, paper, and food industries) are intertwined with residences on the European side of Istanbul, an intense infection cluster is observed when using HEP records from different periods during the pandemic. The areas where the workplaces

29 Odman, Asli, and Murat Tülek. 2020. [“Socio-spatial inequalities during the pandemic and data/public health relationship”. Turkish Medical Association-Monitoring Board, Covid-19 Sixth Month Report], edited by Osman Elbek, 510–32. https://www.ttb.org.tr/kutuphane/covid19-rapor_6/covid19-rapor_6_Part60.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2022.

30 Urban95: Data-Driven Policy Tool, <http://map.kent95.org/istanbul>, was supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and implemented by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV). The data analysis, mapping, and digital tool creation stages of the project were carried out in collaboration with the Kadir Has University Istanbul Studies Center. [Age and market value maps: Murat Güvenç, Murat Tülek, Funda Dönmez Ferhanoğlu, Gizem Fidan, Arjin Taş (Kadir Has University / Istanbul Studies Center); field research and coordination: Bürge Elvan Erginli, Baran Karsak; interactive mapping: Murat Tülek; design: Oğuzhan Erdurak; software: Yakup Çetinkaya].

31 Temurçin, Kadir, and Yolcu Aldırmaz. 2017. [“Industry in Istanbul Province: Historical Development, Structural Change, Spatial Transformation”. Spatial and Regional Transformations in Turkey], edited by Kadir Temurçin and Murat Ali Dulupçu, Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Yayınları, 8.

of small and medium-sized manufacturing industries are concentrated in the districts of Bağcılar, Bahçelievler, Güngören, and Esenler between the two highways became and have remained a grave ‘red infection island’ in terms of epidemic risk very early on. The created social maps clearly showed the densely populated neighbourhoods with little access to green urban areas and with proximity to central transportation routes, which constituted condensed COVID-19 islands, reflecting the spatial inequalities inflicted upon the working class.³²

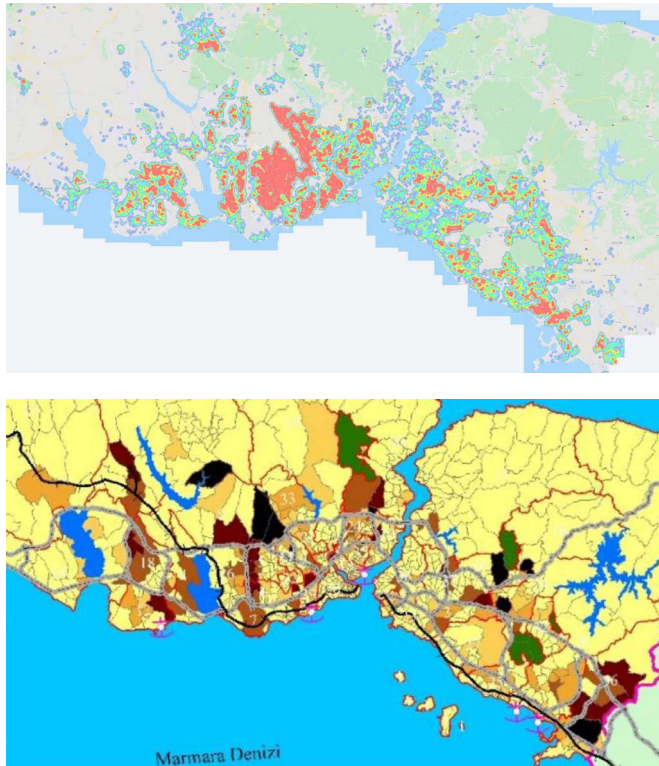


FIG. 5: Juxtaposition of the official COVID-19 heat map from 6 September 2020 with Istanbul’s industrial clusters from 2014. Upper map: See Fig. 6 for reference. Lower map: See Fig. 2 for reference.

With those maps, the invisibility of labouring Istanbul becomes more visible in the condensed areas of production like organised industrial zones. The heat map of the disease seems to stop at their borders. The areas of small enterprises within

32 For interactive, juxtaposed versions of all nine maps focusing on different zones in Istanbul for 6 September 2020, see the hyperlinks in the following article: Odman, Ash. 2021. “Pandemide çalışmak zorunda olmak: İşçi Sağlığı Yoksa, Halk Sağlığı da Yok!” [Having to work in a pandemic: No Worker Health, No Public Health!], 20 January. <https://sendika.org/2021/01/pandemide-calismak-zorunda-olmak-isci-sagligi-yoksa-halk-sagligi-da-yok-606282/>; for the more general maps: Istanbul general (clusters of industry and a COVID-19 heat map), light industry on the European side of Istanbul (market value+age group differentiations and a COVID-19 heat map), and heavy industry on the Asian side of Istanbul (market value+age group differentiations and a COVID-19 heat map).

densely populated areas, sometimes within the same residential building, never ceased to be hotspots of COVID-19 infection. And the areas with a discernible density of gated communities offer the possibility of working from home and “introverting into class”.

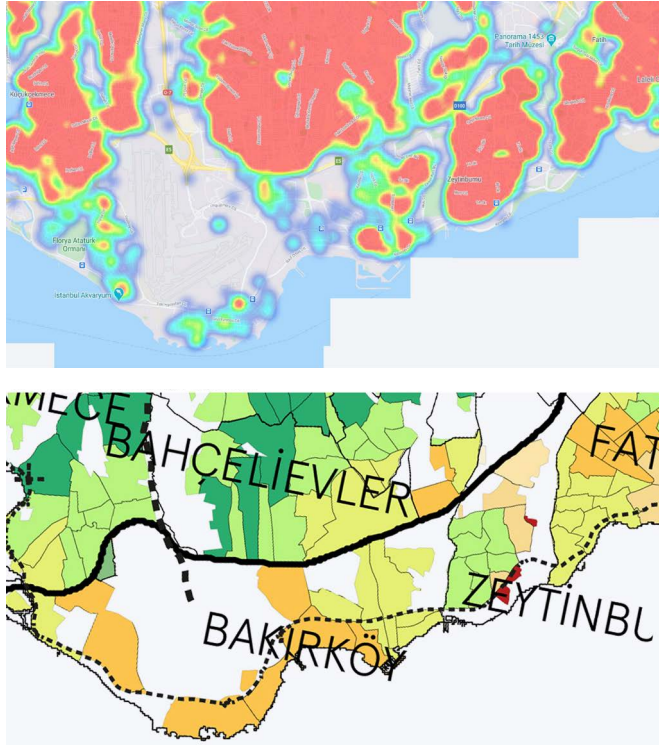


FIG. 6: Juxtaposition of the official COVID-19 heat map from 6 September 2020 with the urban95 social profile map indicating market value and age group differentiations for the districts around the E5 highway from 2018. An extract of this map: Light industry on the European side of Istanbul. <https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/juxtapose/latest/embed/index.html?uid=b1233010-3c0d-11eb-83c8-ebb5d6f907df>. Accessed 10 August 2022.

Outlook

This contribution seeks to document three tumultuous years of a modest and collective research agenda aimed at making the workplaces and the ‘citizens as workers’ in Istanbul visible behind the uproarious images of the Istanbul city brand. From an eclectic, case-based approach to the construction workers involved in the mega-project of Istanbul’s third airport to an attempt at holistically mapping labour in the COVID-19 workplace clusters hidden behind the official disease heat maps, the motivation remains the same: it is a work in progress towards social and environmental justice ‘at the point of the production of cities’, where potentials of emancipatory and inclusionary social struggles ultimately lie.

