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Making violence public: spatializing (counter)publicness through the 1993 Sivas Arson attack, Turkey

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Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between violence and public space in light of a collectively perpetrated and widely televised arson attack that took place in 1993 in Sivas, Turkey, and its recent on-site commemorations. It draws on critical theoretical perspectives developed since the 1990s to consider conventional models of public space as entangled in violence, while also aiming to contribute to contemporary scholarship on contrarian responses to this entanglement. The tendency in this scholarship is to identify these responses as bottom-up, unscripted, performative and direct, and therefore as diametrically opposed to those identified as top-down, scripted, rational, and legislation-facing. The multifarious initiatives and interventions involving contextually shifting priorities, positions and strategies that mark the case discussed in this article call this tendency into question. Unassimilable under such binary oppositions, these initiatives and interventions have not refrained from engaging conventional models of public space while also developing and mobilizing contrarian ones. This article ultimately argues that public space is not just where violence occurs but also where its semantic disambiguation is pursued; this pursuit, which involves various forms of socio-political work, in turn defines and continually redefines the very distinction between conventional and contrarian imaginaries of public space.

Introduction

This article explores the markedly spatial ways violence and publicness shape each other. It does so in light of a collectively perpetrated and widely televised arson attack that took place in 1993 in Sivas, central-eastern Turkey, and its recent on-site commemorations. Various spatially charged mobilizations of publicness have characterized both the lead-up to and the aftermath of the Sivas arson attack. The arson resulted from an entire afternoon of unrest in the city centre, which ultimately drew thousands and which the authorities chose not to quell purportedly for fear of antagonizing 'the public'. It targeted individuals participating in a culture festival organized as a public outreach event by representatives of a demographically minor faith group. 33 of the festival's guests were killed as the hotel accommodating them was set alight by tens of assailants before an inactive law enforcement, thousands of mostly supportive onlookers, and live TV cameras. In the attack's wake, those upholding the victims' legacy launched a campaign for the authorities to turn the hotel into a public memorial museum. This paved the way for the building's state-sponsored transformation in 2011 into a commemorative-cum-educational institution, which also designated it as 'public space'. The authorities then used this designation to attempt at unprecedentedly banning the annual commemorative gathering held on site by those upholding the victims' legacy. The following year, a major court case on the arson attack expired due to the statute of limitations which would not have applied had the judiciary treated the atrocity as a crime against humanity rather than ordinary homicide. The organizers of the annual commemoration responded to the ban and the expiration by identifying the site of the arson attack as *meydan*. That *meydan* is the Turkish-language word for 'town square' helped invoke the early 2010s' wave of popular protests staged in and named after central squares of metropolises across the wider geography around Turkey. That it also denotes the socio-judicially charged space of ritual in Alevism helped reflect on the socio-political and judicial shortcomings which have characterized the atrocity's aftermath.

Critical theoretical perspectives developed since the 1990s have fundamentally reconceptualized both violence (Agamben, 1998; Farmer, 2004; Žižek, 2008; Loyd, 2012) and public space (Fraser, 1990; Deutsche, 1996; Negt and Kluge, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Warner, 2005; Iveson, 2007), helping to conclusively dispense with the deep-seated assumption that the two concepts are mutually antithetical. This article draws on these perspectives to consider violence and public space as entangled and in so doing follows a growing body of contemporary scholarship similarly attuned to this entanglement (Springer, 2011; Mustafa *et al*., 2013). When conceptualizing emancipatory and contrarian responses to the entanglement between violence and public space, scholars tend to set bottom-up, unscripted, performative and direct action in diametric opposition to top-down, scripted, rational, and legislation-facing intervention.

Consider, however, the synopsis that opened this article. First, the authorities identified violence's perpetrators and supportive onlookers as 'the public'; then, those upholding the victims' legacy responded to this identification by appropriating it as part of a campaign for a state-sponsored (i.e. publicly funded) commemorative transformation of the site of violence; finally, the state's attempt to address this campaign was met with the contrarian mobilization of yet another notion of spatial publicness with significant socio-judicial and political undertones. This synopsis indicates that contrarian responses to the entanglement between violence and public space may mobilize multifarious initiatives and interventions involving contextually shifting priorities, positions and strategies irreducible to a predetermined polarization between forms of political work that are presumed the preserve of certain subject positions.

Aiming to do justice to this multifariousness, I begin below by conceptualizing conventional models of public space as constituted in violence (Agamben, 1998), and violence as a force involving objective, symbolic and systemic facets (Žižek, 2008) that work in tandem (Loyd, 2012) rather than in isolation (Farmer, 2004). I then revisit key theorizations of 'counterpublicness' (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2005) in light of relevant spatially focused scholarship (Deutsche, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Iveson, 2007; Staeheli, 2010). The aim in so doing is to understand space's role in the development and mobilization of contrarian imaginaries of publicness vis-à-vis conventional ones. I follow by offering a history of the various context-specific notions of public space later discussed in the article and violence's role in it. I then discuss the various notions of publicness that featured in the arson attack itself and how these were spatially articulated and contested. This is followed by findings from my fieldwork on commemorative practices in and around the site of the arson attack, which were laden with various and often conflicting imaginaries of public space. In conclusion, I argue that public space is not just where violence occurs but also where its semantic disambiguation is pursued through multifarious and seemingly mutually antithetical forms of socio-political work. It is through this work, whose multifariousness ought to be appraised in light of the specific histories and contexts against which it is carried out, that the distinction between conventional and contrarian notions of public space is defined and continually redefined.

Violence, (counter)publicnesss, and space

Since the late twentieth century, violence has been retheorized in ways that have linked it inextricably to debates on public space. Consider Agamben's (1998) modern history of biopolitics. He famously traced this history back to the ancient Roman *homo sacer*, whose murder lacked legal definition as it was categorized neither as sacrifice nor as crime. The history of modernity, argued Agamben, saw this sort of semantically ambiguous violence gradually become standard practice in the governing of populations and culminate in the concentration camp. So standard did the practice become that '[t]oday it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West' (*ibid*.: 181). For Agamben, the camp as

such underpins 'the models by which social sciences, sociology, urban studies, and architecture today are trying to conceive and organize the public space of the world's cities' (*ibid*.)—models, to which the rest of this article refers as 'conventional'.

The way the relationship between violence and public space features in Agamben is significant for two reasons. First, it concerns much more than just the readily discernible instances of physical aggression, which Žižek (2008) would later call 'subjective violence' and to which understandings of violence had until then been limited when it featured, if rarely, in the scholarship on public space (Arendt, 1970: 63-64). That the sort of violence inflicted on *homo sacer* gradually institutionalized into standard practice epitomizes what, through Galtung (1969), Farmer (2004) has called a 'structural' force—or, in Žižek's terms, 'objective violence'. Secondly, the semantic ambiguity over *homo sacer*'s murder and its legal unaccountability mean that understanding the violence at work in it is less a question of ontology than one of meaning and how the latter is systematized into the law. To continue with Žižek (*ibid*.: 1), this merits another bifurcation: 'symbolic violence', which involves 'language' and 'its imposition of a certain universe of meaning', and 'systemic violence', which concerns 'the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems'.

The symbolic/systemic bifurcation helps alleviate a problem flagged by critics of such Galtung-inspired conceptualizations of 'structural violence' as Farmer's (2004), which Žižek's notion of 'objective violence' might otherwise be said to approximate (van der Linden, 2012). The problem concerns the assumption that what 'structural violence' structures is space—that, like space, 'structural violence' is not always easily contourable and, as such, operates uniformly across it. In a roundtable on Farmer's concept, Wacquant has outlined three ways in which this assumption debilitates the analytical potential of 'structural violence' (Farmer, 2004: 322). First, it overlooks the unequal distribution of violence's effects across the occupants of a given space; in fact, for many of its direct victims, 'structural violence' is not invisible or difficult to contour as they feel its effects in physical and readily discernible ways. Secondly, conflating instances of violence traceable to specific culprits with those involving consensual subordination through power relations flattens the varying degrees of responsibility involved in each instance. Finally, the anachronistic collapsing of various phenomena from across history under the same heading of 'structural violence' overlooks the importance of historical context and the meaning each such phenomenon carried at the time of its occurrence. Loyd's (2012) take on the concept has sought to amend these shortcomings. For her, the two phenomena constituting the concept of 'structural violence' ought to be understood not as 'space' and 'violence' in the abstract but as context-specific spatial imaginaries that are both constituted by unaccounted-for violent histories and constitutive of the continuing infliction of observable harm on particular subjects.

This article's usage of the adjective 'structural' or 'objective' takes its cue from such criticisms. Rather than compartmentalize violence into distinct forms and/or scales, it is meant to

convey the various and mutually intersecting means through which violence is inflicted and left unaccounted for—namely, symbolic and systemic ones. The usage also carries with it an awareness of the power relations as part of which these means are employed. '[O]ften it is only by being "violent" that excluded groups have gained access to the public spaces of democracy ... it is precisely such "violence" that has forced the liberalization of public space laws' (Mitchell, 2003: 52). In using the inverted comma and referencing laws, Mitchell highlights not only the role of semantics and legislation in negotiating the relationship between violence and public space but also power's centrality to this negotiation. The tendency among those in power to identify collectively manifested challenges to socio-spatial marginalization as 'violent' depoliticizes not only these manifestations but also the concept of violence as it flattens the uneven power relations structuring both (Dikeç, 2017). Therefore, exploring conventional models of public space as the stuff of the symbolic and systemic infliction and legitimization of 'violence' requires that this concept be understood as the violation of the bodily and psychological integrity of the *less powerful*.

Taking Mitchell's argument seriously also means to avoid dismissing the politics of conventional models of public space as oppressive or celebrating it as emancipatory and to understand it instead as the stuff of socio-political contestation. Space, after all, is political not because it embodies mutually conflicting interests or power positions but insofar as it becomes 'the polemical place where a wrong can be addressed', 'equality can be demonstrated', and the otherwise 'naturalized orders of domination' can be interrupted by those they seek to dominate (Dikeç, 2005: 172). Similarly, the 'publicness' of public space is not 'preordained' but rather shaped and continually reshaped through 'the struggle for rights' and for 'social justice' (Mitchell, 2003: 35-36). If resolving violence's semantic ambiguity is part and parcel of this struggle, precisely what sorts of spatial imaginaries might arise from such struggles and how might they do so in relation to conventional models of public space? This is the larger of the two enquiries that guide my empirical analysis.

While not always necessarily spatially focused, theories of counterpublicness developed contemporarily with the abovementioned retheorizations of violence are pivotal to these questions. Foremost among these theories is Fraser's (1990), which was premised on a critique of Habermas' (1991) idealization of the bourgeois public sphere as civil, accessible, rational, and *the only* public sphere at that. For Fraser, 'not only were there always a plurality of competing publics but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual' (1990: 61). She called these 'other publics' as 'counterpublics', spheres across which 'subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses' that permit 'oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (*ibid*.: 67). For Fraser, Habermas' 'sharp separation of (associational) civil society and the state' allowed only for 'weak publics'—publics that engage merely in 'opinion-formation' while leaving other essential business such as 'decision-making', 'self-management', 'inter-public coordination', and 'political accountability'

to states (Fraser, 1990: 75-76). Conversely, counterpublics are strong publics; they facilitate not only 'withdrawal and regroupment' but also 'agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Fraser, 1990: 68). That counterpublics are conceptualized in contradistinction to neither privacy nor the state but to other publics and that they continually aspire to become publics warrant parenthesizing the concept's adjectival prefix, as in (counter)publicness.

The rise of radical democracy theories around the millennial turn meant that Fraser would be criticized for paradoxically reproducing the very theoretical sway on which she challenged Habermas: the idealization of full integration, reasoned deliberation and harmonious convergence as the ultimate aspirations of publicness. Deutsche, for instance, conceptualized publicness as 'the abandonment of the belief in an absolute basis of social unity' and in 'an essential identity or true interest', which renders it 'the uncertain social realm' that simultaneously constitutes and jeopardizes 'the meaning of the people' (1996: 268). Reconceptualized in this light, counter-ness refers not to a quality of predetermined agendas but to (counter)publics' constituents' willingness to 'encounter others' (*ibid*.: 286; cf. Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017: 9)—ways of being other than one's own—and to allow such encounters to continually reshape the agendas in question. But this also raises a question: precisely what might constitute these encounters as such, or the otherness of the others being encountered?

According to Warner's theory of 'publics and counterpublics', the answer to this question hinges on form rather than content. (Counter)publics, for him, operate against 'not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one', where the dominance concerns 'speech genres', 'modes of address' and 'media' as opposed to just 'ideas or policy' (Warner, 2005: 119; cf. Negt and Kluge, 2002). Warner has argued that rational-critical hermeneutics is foremost among the dominant forms and that (counter)publics challenge it by preferring 'embodied sociability' over 'the ideology of reading' or 'performance' over 'print' (Warner, 2005: 123). This argument has resonated with recent analyses of violence's relationship to public space. 'Spontaneous action and performance' (Mustafa *et al*., 2013: 14) and 'unscripted interaction' (Springer, 2011: 526) have been considered conducive to contrarian positions, which have been categorically identified as 'non-violent' while 'violence' has been associated, in Arendtian fashion, with the annihilation of politics (Mustafa *et al*., 2013) or with cyclical mechanisms of domination and submission that foreclose any possibility of emancipation (Springer, 2011). Such arguments and analyses have insightfully avoided reproducing rationality and civility as preconditions for (counter)publicness. But they have largely evaded the question of precisely how the boundary between the rational-critical and its other is probed and constituted, and how violence bears upon this process as a phenomenon whose meaning is not necessarily always unambiguously determined prior to its occurrence. Hence the more specific enquiry framing my empirical analysis.

If the theories referenced in this section are not necessarily all spatially focused, this is not to suggest that they are readily transferable to discussions on public space. It is to argue that

imaginaries of 'public space' are not just constitutive of but also constituted and reconstituted time and again by claims to publicness. 'If the publicly accessible spaces of the city are easy to understand as "locations" for the public sphere, it is important to remember that they are not the only locations' (Staeheli, 2010: 72; cf. Mitchell 2003: 35). This article considers the site where the Sivas arson attack took place as epitomizing just such a caveat. Few sites are further from the conventional image of public space than a building located on a side street, one which long served as a private hotel to then become host to a 9-to-5 state institution (Figure 1). But this has not prevented the site from becoming subject to spatial imaginaries of publicness and, as discussed below, the arson attack is what has led it to become that. This is not to say that the site's physicality is irrelevant to these imaginaries. That 'publics have no proper location … does not mean that all kinds of space are equivalent or equally available for those engaged in struggles to make publics' (Iveson, 2007: 13). The physicality of each location through which imaginaries of publicness become manifest bears upon their political potentials and limitations. Assessing these potentials and limitations therefore requires that such locations be subjected to 'empirical analysis' rather than being celebrated as ideal public spaces or dismissed as failed ones (*ibid.*). It is this sort of an analysis that I seek to offer below through an ethnography of spatial commemoration in and around the site of the 1993 Sivas arson attack.[1]

Concepts of spatial publicness in modern Turkey and their relationship to violence

Before proceeding with empirical analysis, some contextualization is in order regarding the histories through which conventional models of public space came into being in the geography hosting today's Turkey and their relation to the question of violence. Conditioned by Western-European-style consumerism, the nineteenth-century 'birth of public space' in the Ottoman Empire was less that that than the marginalization and eventual replacement of various other already-existing sites of socialization attended especially by the Muslim majority (Göçek and Özyüksel, 2012). This systemic transformation not only continued unabated but also assumed a new facet in the early twentieth century as ethnically driven nationalisms gained prominence. The various ethnic homogenization policies implemented between 1913 and 1950, including the deportation of the Ottoman Armenians which paved the way to the Armenian genocide, prevented citizens from performing difference and in so doing established the hegemony of Turkish nationalism in and over 'public space' (Üngör, 2011: 212-34). This history is directly pertinent to this article's empirical focus: Sivas province was among the genocide's epicentres, as a third of its population at the time was non-Muslim and two-thirds of its non-Muslims were Armenian (Marchand and Perrier, 2015: 26).

The impact that ethnic homogenization in early-twentieth-century Turkey made on public space has become manifest in specific sites. Many of today's publicly owned lands, including the former Presidential Palace part of which has long served as a public museum, were in fact confiscated during such violent episodes as the Armenian genocide that to this day remain

unreckoned with (Kezer, 2012). Squares, too, are among the physical spatial manifestations of this homogenization, a prominent example being Ankara's Ulus ('Nation') Square. It was built out of a site called Taşhan Square, which, throughout the Ottoman era, had gradually come to host various activities typically associated with 'public spaces', ranging from political demonstrations to commercial activity (Sargın, 2004). Physically, transformations of the sort that converted Taşhan into Ulus involved government-led spatial interventions premised on the West Central European approach to urban planning and its model of the public square (Bozdoğan, 2001: 67-77). Social substance was forged through collective performances of national homogeneity and citizen-led campaigns for monuments to populate squares like Ulus, aiming towards the absolute coalescence of the citizenry and the emergent nation-state (Sargın, 2004: 665; Yüksekli and Akalın, 2011: 651). The radicalness of these interventions was tempered with nominal continuity; the word *meydan*, long employed to denote sites like Taşhan whose identification as 'public space' owed more to historical habituality than to prescription by design, was adopted as the official descriptor for the 'new' squares.

The second half of the twentieth century saw violence feature increasingly frequently in these squares. Non-Muslim populations identified as minorities under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which had secured international legal recognition for the then-nascent Republic of Turkey, were assaulted in episodes of 'civil violence organized and/or overlooked by the government' such as the mid-1950s' pogroms in central Istanbul (Batuman, 2015: 892). The question of semantics was central to such episodes. Mainstream politicians and journalists identified them not as 'violence' but as 'the people's reaction' to some other contemporaneous event, which in the mid-1950s' case was the ethnic conflict in Cyprus. That official public spaces played a central role in many of these 'people's reactions'—for instance, Istanbul's central square Taksim in the mid-1950s' pogroms—amplified violence's centrality to the spatial ways in which the people and the publicness in question co-constituted each other. As the century progressed, such 'reactions' turned inward to engulf the legal majority, an example being the anti-communist assault on an anti-imperialist student rally held in Taksim Square in 1969. The intensification of ideological conflict in the 1970s turned spaces like Taksim Square into 'a symbolic battlefield' over which mutually conflicting publics competed (*ibid*.: 892-93). The 12 September 1980 military coup brought this process to an end and did so not only through numerous restrictions on social rights but also through its use of squares like Taksim for state rallies where the 'popularity' of such restrictive policies was performed (Baykan and Hatuka, 2010).

The mid-1980s saw the restoration of electoral democracy and the neoliberal curtailment of the state's socio-economic presence, inaugurating a period Habermasian accounts have associated with 'the expansion of the public sphere' (Göle, 1994; Yavuz, 2009: 58). But the period also saw other developments overlooked in these accounts, such as the imposition of 'martial law and war in the southeast' and various 'repressive' measures in 'prisons, courtrooms, airport checkpoints, streets, universities, neighbourhoods, or through media and other means in

one's home' (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 132). Indeed, operating in entanglement with 'free market' forces, the state continued to influence 'public life' so significantly as to empirically invalidate distinctions between it and civil society, and to preclude basing one's understanding of publicness on such a distinction (*ibid*.; Özyürek, 2006: 7-8). Evidencing this influence is the term *kamusal alan*, which has come to serve as the primary Turkish-language rendition of 'public space'. While the adjective *kamusal* is intended to convey publicness, *alan* may mean both 'space' and 'sphere'. *Kamusal* is obtained by suffixing the noun *kamu* with *-sal*, which implies relation. *Kamu* may mean 'the state' as well as 'the people', or even 'public' with markedly libertarian undertones, as evident in the word *kamuoyu* (public opinion) (Özbek, 2005). Despite these ambiguities, the late 1980s and early 1990s—the very period that Habermasian accounts have associated with the expansion of the public sphere in Turkey—saw *kamusal alan* rise to prominence, especially among scholars of urbanism and architecture, as the Turkish-language rendition of 'public space' (Açıkgöz, 2004). But, as the etymology and history provided here suggest, any expansion that *kamusal alan* is alleged to have undergone always necessarily entails subjugation to, rather than just emancipation from, such dominant forces as those of the state and/or the market (Çınar, 2005: 38).

Entanglements between violence and public space during the Sivas arson attack

The Sivas arson attack took place on 2 July 1993, at a time when the 1990s' debates on *kamusal alan* in Turkey were in full swing. Rather than a sudden assault, it was the culmination of an entire afternoon of unrest in central Sivas instigated by tens of individuals, ultimately attracting thousands. Judging by the slogans they chanted, the ring-leaders were anti-secularists and Islamic fundamentalists protesting certain aspects of the Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Festival then being held in the city (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 47-51). The festival, whose guests were targeted in the arson, was organized by an association representing followers of the Alevi faith, one of Turkey's demographically minor social groups whose practices and rituals differ fundamentally from those associated with Sunnism—the predominant denomination of Islam in Turkey and in central Sivas. The festival had been planned as an annual event when it was inaugurated in 1978. This plan was stillborn due to socio-political unrest across late 1970s' Turkey, which also engulfed Alevis as they were violently targeted in their hundreds by right-wing militants in central and eastern Anatolian cities like Malatya, Çorum, Sivas and Maraş, prompting their exodus to metropolises like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, or even beyond, to Europe (Eral, 1995). This was followed by the 1980 coup and its severe rights restrictions, meaning that it took another decade before the organizers were able to hold the festival annually as initially intended.

Come 1993, the festival was being organized for the fourth time. Still, it had the quality of a debut; for the first time, the festival's venues included those in central Sivas instead of being confined to a historically significant Alevi village in the city's hinterland as they had been in the first three episodes. Moreover, contrary to its precedents, the 1993 episode was programmed as

not just an Alevism-related event but a further-reaching one. It involved writers, performers and musicians, who were not necessarily Alevis but renowned in Turkey's left-leaning circles. In other words, the festival organizers' aspiration to reach—and, in so doing, constitute—publics wider than their fellow Alevis mobilized both space and programming. If this aspiration indexed Alevis' return to the geography that the 1970s' violent episodes had forced them to flee, it would not just restore the previous status quo marked by the commonplace opposition of public to private life and by faith's strict association with the latter. The 'return' would endeavour to ensure that Alevism 'is no longer confined to secrecy and has entered the public space' (Sökefeld, 2002: 169).

But the chain of events that culminated in the arson attack would reiterate that the 'public space' being 'entered' was less a socio-politically neutral container than one whose publicness is entangled in the question of violence. First, with only days until the festival, an anonymous leaflet addressed to 'the Muslim public' and posted through letterboxes in central Sivas incited violence against the festival's keynote speaker Aziz Nesin, the pretext being his recent declaration that he might commission a Turkish-language translation of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 38-39). The night before the arson attack another such leaflet appeared; this time, the addressee was 'our people' and a postscript requested that 'readers reproduce this text and circulate it further' (Aşut, 1994: 323). Meanwhile, right-leaning local newspapers agitated against the festival, questioning especially the 'public' funding it received through the Culture Ministry held by the left-wing partner of the then-governing grand coalition. The agitation centred on a 'Minstrels Monument', which the Ministry had funded and placed outside the culture centre that was the festival's main venue to mark the occasion. The newspapers speculated that the monument did not honour all minstrels as per its official name but clandestinely commemorated Pir Sultan Abdal—the sixteenth-century minstrel venerated in Alevism, after whom the festival was named—which infuriated them as they considered him 'one of the foremost rebels in Anatolia's history' (Bozgeyik, 1993). 'Why, how, and by whom' taxes were dedicated to such a project kept secret from 'the public' was posed as a question that ought to preoccupy 'the people of Sivas' (*Hürdoğan*, 1993a). The local ministerial representative released a statement to quell the speculations targeting the monument, but also pledged to 'tear it down if necessary' (*Hürdoğan*, 1993b).

The claims to and mobilizations of publicness that marked these incendiary reactions to various aspects of the festival would assume an overtly spatial character on the day of the arson attack. Present in Sivas throughout the festival was a group of reporters from a conservative-leaning nationwide network launched just half a year before the arson attack when the state's monopoly on radio and television broadcasting had ended—a development Habermasian accounts of this period in Turkey often feature as symptomatic of the expansion of the public sphere. At a book exhibition held in the courtyard of a public museum in the morning of the festival's second day, one of the reporters from this network challenged the abovementioned

author Aziz Nesin on his plans to translate the *Satanic Verses*. Embarking on ad hominem, the reporter brought up the author's being a public atheist and produced the past couple of days' newspapers and leaflets berating him and his participation in the festival. Nesin's response that 'I don't believe Allah's word; I would need to lose my mind if I were to do so' (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 46) was met with attempts by some members of the small crowd watching the encounter to lunge at him. This encounter was something of an omen due not only to its being the first instance of physical hostility towards a festival guest, but also to what the reporter's contribution to it foreshadowed about the press' role in the arson attack: that this role was not merely one of giving publicity to violence but also involved its incitation (cf. Chalfont *et al.*, 1980). The 1990s' demonopolization of broadcasting that some, as mentioned in the previous section, have categorically celebrated for its contribution to 'the expansion of the public sphere' was therefore thrown into sharp relief as having expanded conventional imaginaries of publicness underpinned by violent homogenization rather than just the range of (counter)publics allowed into this sphere.

About an hour later, a couple dozen people gathered outside a nearby mosque after Friday prayers to head to the culture centre hosting one of the festival's events. Chanting slogans reminiscent of the abovementioned anonymous leaflets, they defaced the Minstrels Monument located in the building's forecourt. This constituted the threshold where the previous days' mutually constitutive calls to publicness and to violence translated from discourse into practice. The assailants then turned to the offices of the Governor to protest the state's providing the festival with public funding. Having shuttled once more between the culture centre and the Governorship and having been pushed back by the police in both locations, they went on to surround the nearby hotel hosting many of the festival's guests. As the assailants grew in number and reached their hundreds, members of the local government and law enforcement attended the scene. Their calls for dispersal were met by the crowd with three prerequisites, among which was the removal of the Minstrels Monument (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 488-92). The authorities complied and brought the toppled monument to the crowd as proof of their compliance. But this only further encouraged the assailants, who seized the monument and dragged it to the forecourt of the hotel where they burnt it, constituting the penultimate stage before the building itself was set ablaze (*ibid.*: 186-87).

The abovementioned broadcasting network continued reporting from Sivas in the run-up to the arson. This meant that the festival guests sheltering inside the hotel from the assailants outside were able to watch TV reports on the events unfolding around them. While the crowd kept growing in number, chanting inflammatory slogans, and attacking the building with stones, the reports periodically and misleadingly announced that 'there has been unrest in Sivas, but the situation is now under control' (Özbakır, 2010). It was not until the building was set alight that they reflected a more up-to-date account of the events. The way the events were reported therefore had a twofold contribution to the violence. Not only did it hinder various attempts to alert the authorities to the urgency of the situation when the arson attack was still preventable,

including those by victims-to-be who made phone calls from inside the hotel to dignitaries they personally knew, albeit to no avail (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 50). Choosing to broadcast images of the event at its most visually sensational moment—an inhabited building set ablaze before the eyes of thousands of spectators—amplified the marginalization of those identifying with the victims and the legitimacy of those outside the hotel as constitutive of 'the people'. Hence the President's remarks the following day that called the arson attack 'an isolated incident' where 'the public were agitated' due to 'severe provocation' and praised the law enforcements' inaction for refusing to 'pit the public and the security forces against each other' (Tüleylioğlu, 2010: 61-62). Similarly, when asked about the casualties, the Prime Minister referred to the victims and survivors as 'individuals', while highlighting that 'thankfully our people outside the hotel were unharmed' (*ibid.*: 59). These remarks recalled the descriptor 'popular reaction' which, as discussed in the previous section, members of various administrations throughout the twentieth century had preferred to use when referring to certain episodes of political violence. In so doing, they demonstrated from day one that the stakes involved in the arson attack included not just what had occurred but also how it would both define and be defined by notions of publicness.

If the state representatives' response to the arson attack followed the tradition outlined in the previous section insofar as it saw in violence an opportunity to reinvigorate the socio-political homogenization underpinning conventional imaginaries of publicness, it was nevertheless particular in its spatiality—in its mapping of 'the people' on to the hotel's 'outside'. Those upholding the victims' legacy have since challenged this by reclaiming the space as a site for commemoration. Their very first defiance of the ban on commemorative gatherings at the site, which had been instituted the day after the arson attack, occurred on 4 September, the locally celebrated anniversary of the '1919 Sivas Congress', an official historiographical milestone in the Turkish National Campaign (1919-22). Three associations founded by Alevis originally hailing from Sivas but headquartered in Istanbul and Ankara brought 300 of their members to Sivas to attend the official public ceremony marking the anniversary. Halfway through the event, they performed an act of *détournement* by suddenly marching to the hotel to commemorate the arson attack's victims (*Hakikat*, 1993). This set the tone for the annual commemoration held on site by those upholding the victims' legacy since 1994.

Challenges to the spatiality characterizing the authorities' response to the arson attack involved not only reclaiming the space outside the hotel but also obliging them to affiliate with its inside. This is evident in the most significant commemorative campaign ran by those claiming the victims' legacy. Launched just days after 2 July 1993 by representatives of various left-leaning political parties and professional organizations, this ongoing campaign demands that the site of the arson attack be turned into a public memorial museum. Although, following the attack, the site was fast repaired and returned to business as a hotel, the campaign has continued unabated over the years while also placing increasing emphasis on precisely who the addressee is—the state. The emphasis was thrown into sharp relief in the mid-2000s when Europe-based

Alevi associations had amassed enough funds to purchase the hotel and to transform it in whatever manner they saw fit but decided otherwise. A senior member of these associations explained the decision thus:

> To accept a memorial museum that is not supported by state officials means also to unjustly claim responsibility for the Sivas massacre. The state authorities, both past and present, are responsible for and guilty of the Sivas massacre—both because they were negligent and because they have since then portrayed it as an ordinary event (Kaplan, 2008).

Framed as such, the campaign grew in popularity throughout the 2000s and inspired further campaigns regarding numerous other sites of political violence in which those upholding the victims' legacy have considered the authorities culpable. These campaigns dovetailed with various intellectuals' calls for Turkey to 'reckon with' its violent past (Sancar, 2007), which culminated in the 2009 government initiative known popularly as *Demokratik Açılım* (Democratic Opening). The initiative consisted of a series of workshops with non-governmental actors and representatives of historically underrepresented groups such as Kurds, Alevis, and non-Muslims, of which senior cabinet members spoke as an opportunity for 'the state to revise its memory' (T.C. Devlet Bakanlığı, 2010: 6, 17).

That the state convert the site of the arson attack into a memorial museum was among the five demands raised during the so-called Alevi workshops. This kickstarted a process in which the site hosted the first-ever ministerial-level commemorative visit, was expropriated in late 2010, and underwent a state-sponsored architectural transformation project in spring 2011. A press preview held in June revealed that the building had become a commemorative-cum-educational institution named the Science and Culture Centre and open to the public for visits throughout the working week. My fieldwork in Sivas began in the immediate aftermath of this transformation and took place at intervals over the following two years. It comprised interviews with various state officials involved in the Science and Culture Centre project as well as an ethnography of the daily goings-on inside the building and the on-site commemoration held annually by those claiming the victims' legacy.

Mobilizing public spatial imaginaries through commemorations of the arson attack

The commemorative centrepiece of the Science and Culture Centre is a so-called Memory Corner—a 70-squaremetre room hosting a three-by-four-and-a-half-metre stainless-steel wall displaying a list of names, a set of fountainlets, and two statements (Figure 2). The number of fountainlets is equal to that of the names commemorated: 37. This number, therefore, is not limited to the 33 festival participants and the two hotel employees killed inside the hotel but also includes the two individuals who were among the crowd outside and who died as it was belatedly dispersed by law enforcement. The authorities have justified this as 'a human-centric' refusal 'to

discriminate between the dead' (Yalçınkaya and Ceylan, 2011). The names are in first-name-alphabetical order, meaning one of these two individuals leads the list.

One of the two statements the Memory Corner displays is more relevant to this article than the other, and so will be explored at greater length.[2] It reads, 'Regardless of the different ideas, different beliefs in society, there is no unachievable task, no unsurpassable obstacle for a nation that knows how to act in national unity and togetherness', and is attributed to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who famously led the Turkish National Campaign and served as the founding president of the Republic of Turkey until his death in 1938. The attribution is conveyed through Kemal's iconic signature and a gilded mask portraying his face, which accompany the statement. This has led the Memory Corner to resemble the so-called 'Atatürk corners' that have long populated the lobbies of Turkey's official institutions, public buildings, and schools (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 188-203). The rest of the Science and Culture Centre is geared towards schoolchildren aged between 7 and 14, who are intended to visit the site with their teachers. The educational spaces look markedly different from the building's commemorative section; they are brightly-lit, furnished in curvaceous lines and vibrant shades of red, blue and yellow, and sporadically decorated with Olympic rings.

According to the construction engineer in his late 30s who ran the transformation project, the building's various functions were determined by senior government representatives, who 'concurred that this place should become a common [*ortak*] one'. For him, even the building's name embodied this objective: rather than reference certain events or people upheld by nationalist historiography as per standard practice in Turkey, the name reads 'Science and Culture Centre—a thoroughly neutral, *kamu* name' befitting a building 'identified with *kamu*'. Indeed, the term *kamu* (public, the state, the people) featured prominently in the hotel's transformation into Science and Culture Centre even before construction began. It is the root of *kamulaştırma* (literally: making *kamu)*, the Turkish-language word for expropriation, which constituted the first step towards the building's transformation. The term was also central to the way the architect commissioned for the project reflected on it. 'Like all *kamu* buildings around the world, this, too, is a heavy, oppressive and serious building', he admitted. The term indicated neutrality for the architect just as it did for the engineer. That the building was redesigned with an awareness of its 'belonging to *kamu*', he suggested, has helped accommodate future scenarios in which the authorities may decide to use parts of it for various other purposes. For him, the decorative use of Olympic rings—a world-renowned motif of national and/or political impartiality (Lennartz, 2001/2002)—and the first-name-alphabetical order of the name list were also evidence of the building's alleged neutrality.

My research inside the building revealed that the architectural elements through which its alleged neutrality was forged also included the upper four floors that constitute the bulk of the building and remain empty to this day. When faced with visitors' criticism, employees invoked

the emptiness of these floors. When a couple in their mid-30s lambasted the memorial wall's inclusion of 'assailants' names', the employee tending them admitted to the 'imperfection' of the Science and Culture Centre. But he stressed that this was just a well-intentioned start; in fact, the bulk of the building remained empty, and feedback of the sort provided by the couple could well influence what might later become of it. When a father and his teenage son complained that the building had become a Science and Culture Centre rather than a memorial museum proper, the employee tending them pointed yet again to the upper floors. Presuming that the father and son were Alevis as per the affiliation of the organizations that have most ardently campaigned for an on-site memorial museum, the employee claimed that there was a possibility for handing the upper levels over to an Alevi association, which could then use them as it sees fit: 'turn them into a museum, or perhaps even into a *cemevi*' (place of Alevi worship; literally: house of gathering).

The idle upper floors proved instrumental to dealing with visitor criticism of an anti-museum nature as well as a pro-museum one. When faced with visitors who found even the Memory Corner too significant a concession granted to those campaigning for an on-site memorial museum, the employee highlighted that the building had after all been expropriated (*kamulaştırıldı)*; it now belonged to *kamu*, who, 'if necessary, might turn it into a post office or a bank', the upper floors evidencing that definitive plans in this respect were still in the making. In sum, employees mobilized the upper floors' emptiness—a quality certain spatial theorists have considered as enabling greater 'publicness' by allowing 'interpretation' (Spector, 2014: 183-184)—to attempt at giving substance to the alleged neutrality of the Science and Culture Centre through a performance of openness to participation and willingness to adapt.

Larger-scale implications of such performances of and claims to neutrality enacted through various aspects of the Science and Culture Centre became evident during the 2011 episode of the annual commemoration held in Sivas by those upholding the victims' legacy. Held in the immediate aftermath of the building's relaunch as Science and Culture Centre, the commemoration was declared illegal by the local authorities for the first time in its 18-year history. The event's organizers, who comprise representatives of various left-leaning organizations and Alevi associations, met with the Governor of Sivas a week before the anniversary as per usual to inform him about the commemoration, only to be replied that the building is now '*kamusal alan* and therefore no longer available for such gatherings' (Yıldız, 2011). Although the commemoration eventually went ahead, the attempted ban materialized in police barricades mounted 15 metres ahead of the building, which prevented flower-laying at its doorstep except by a handful of victims' relatives and senior Alevi figures. The police also barricaded every side street leading to the spot, except that which carried the commemorative procession. Ironically, the organizers had already decided that commemoration participants would refuse to enter the building in order to perform their disapproval of various aspects of the Science and Culture Centre, including its general failure to deliver a museum proper but more specifically its all-encompassing name list, against which victims' relatives had also filed a

lawsuit (Benli 2016). Still, flower-laying at the doorstep was a gesture that hundreds of commemoration participants tended to perform every year and, when more than just the handful allowed past the barricade insisted on doing so, the police reacted by using tear gas. This triggered a brief scuffle between around 20 young activists and the police, snapshots of which populated mainstream newspapers' front pages the morning after to underprop allegations regarding the violent tendencies of commemoration participants.

The 2012 episode of the on-site commemoration was heavily influenced by a court decision delivered in March that year, when one of the lawsuits on the arson attack lapsed due to the statute of limitations (Tanyeri-Erdemir, 2012). Hundreds gathered outside the courthouse in Ankara during the hearing to promulgate that, had the judiciary treated the arson attack as a crime against humanity rather than a simple case of homicide, the case would not have been subject to the statute of limitations (Ziflioğlu, 2012). When the outcome of the hearing was declared, the gathering turned into an indefinite sit-in. This was soon dispersed by the police with tear gas and water cannons.

A few months later, the commemoration in Sivas saw the barricades move further up along the route of the procession by about half-a-kilometre and therefore closer to the predominantly Alevi-inhabited neighbourhood whence the event departs every year. A sit-in ensued, which led the police to move the barricades back to where they had been in 2011. Virtually all side streets leading to the site were also sealed as they had been the previous year. What was different from the previous year was the type of barricade mounted in the building's forecourt. The simple plastic shields employed previously were replaced with a two-metre-high steel barrier, which the police have since continued to mount at the site on commemoration day. Also different from 2011 was the proactivity with which the commemoration's organizing committee responded to the provocative potential of these 'public safety' instruments. The bus that had just led the procession was now parked sideways to cover the steel barrier (Figure 3). This was significant not only because it reduced the likelihood of confrontation with the police but also because it created a spatial arrangement that helped orient the entire body of activists towards the Science and Culture Centre. Each speaker addressing the event was therefore able to use the building as the object of their successive denunciations of the arson attack, the authorities' and the media's roles in it, the failure of the site's architectural transformation to deliver a museum, and the recent lapsing of the court case due to the statute of limitations. But the building was also mobilized as a datum point against which to articulate alternatives, as the speeches culminated in the following remarks by the chairperson of the Alevi association that leads the commemoration's organizing committee: 'the court case on this massacre is not held in palaces of justice; it is held here in this *meydan*!'

The chairperson's use of the term *meydan* in reference to the otherwise nondescript space occupied by the commemoration is significant for at least two reasons. First, *meydan* denotes the

socio-judicial and spiritual platform in Alevism where grievances are raised, disputes are resolved, and misdoings are penalized (Shankland, 2003: 127-28). Secondly, as explained in the section before last, *meydan* is the Turkish-language word for public square. Its variants are employed across the geographical triangle demarcated by and inclusive of Libya, Ukraine and India to convey the same meaning. The word, moreover, has recently acquired an overtly political significance across this geography due to the numerous waves of mass protest which took place across its metropolises and which were named after the central square in each metropolis, including Istanbul. A direct link between the latter and the Sivas arson attack materialized in mid-June 2013 when the police's crackdown on activists occupying Istanbul's central square Taksim and the adjacent Gezi Park sparked a new wave of anti-violence protest in the form of individuals standing motionless in Turkey's cities. Among the venues of this protest was the forecourt of Science and Culture Centre (Verstraete, 2013: 8), providing further substance to its association with the concept of *meydan*. In sum, those espousing such an association have not so much repudiated the *kamusal*-ness that the Science and Culture Centre project has attributed to the site of the arson attack as they have repurposed it towards the collective expression of dissent and the pursuit of social justice.[3]

Concluding remarks

This article has worked from the axiom that, if violence and conventional models of public space are inextricably linked to each other, untangling this link is less a question of ontology than one of semantics. Put differently, violence and publicness are defined and continually redefined through each other in particular contexts and through specific events, and these definitions in turn become legally and culturally systematized into spatial imaginaries. Importantly, these processes of definition and systematization are causal rather than teleological; each is an opportunity to expose and, in so doing, challenge the conventional model of public space it features. The 1993 Sivas arson attack was such a process in which a concept of 'publicness' characterized by a double homogenization—one which involved the state's absolute coalescence with a citizenry conceived as a socio-politically uniform entity—was spatially mobilized to, first, incite violence, secondly, give violence physical visibility, and, finally, obscure the uneven power relations structuring the varying degrees of culpability for violence. If those upholding the victims' legacy were aware of this threefold mobilization, they sought to challenge it not just by condemning it but also by precipitating its architectural materialization. Hence their campaign for a state-sponsored memorial museum on site, to which the authorities responded with the Science and Culture Centre—a project that mobilized various spatial imaginaries rooted in the concept of *kamu* (public, the state, the people) including *kamulaştırma* (expropriation; literally: making *kamu*) and *kamusal alan* (public space/sphere).

This architectural materialization gave the campaigners a reference point against which to demonstrate their own spatial imaginaries of publicness. But performance and direct action,

which involved relating to the site as *meydan* (public square, and socio-judicially charged space of Alevi ritual) and refusing to enter the building unless its 'neutral' attitude towards the arson attack was rectified, constituted only one form of such demonstrations. These were combined with a rational-critical hermeneutics evident in the campaigners' legal challenge against the name list, which contrasted with the socio-politically homogenizing rational-criticality characterizing the model of public space that became manifest through the Science and Culture Centre's self-proclaimed neutrality. Indeed, it is this combination that from the outset has characterized the activism around the arson attack, which has not only subverted conventional imaginaries of publicness by compelling the spatial crystallization of their semantic and systemic entanglement in violence but also staged contrarian ones in the form of commemorative gatherings on site.

These processes, in which contrarian models of public space have developed dialectically with conventional ones and have combined the methods of rational-criticality with those of embodied sociability, are therefore far from unscripted or spontaneous. Nor might they be rigidly formalized as bottom-up or direct versus top-down or legislation-facing. Still, there is a distinguishing characteristic of (counter)public-spatial imaginaries that these processes indicate: an awareness that the context-independent acceptance of such formal-methodological oppositions might itself contribute to the semantic means through which violence is legally and culturally systematized and, in so doing, might perpetuate conventional models of public space.

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Notes

[1] This exploration of commemoration dovetails with my larger project, which reconsiders a tendency prevalent among students of commemorative practices (Çaylı 2018). The tendency is to prematurely declare events as complete by misunderstanding the various ways in which they are represented, for instance through spatial commemoration, as constituting their aftermath rather than their ongoing development. This becomes especially troubling when dealing with violent events as it takes for granted a sharp separation between violence and culture: violence is implied as limited to the instance of physical aggression and thus the symbolic and systemic ways in which commemoration's 'cultural' mechanisms of naming, appropriating and displacing the past contribute to it are overlooked. Questioning this tendency through a focus on publicness might help treat 'public' as an analytical concept rather than a descriptive one, the latter being the

inclination in the literature on spatial commemoration where monuments and memorials are appraised for their ability to trigger 'public discourses', constitute 'public spaces', and/or enhance 'public participation'.

[2] The other statement is unsigned and synopsizes the speech a Minister of State delivered at the site in 2010 when he became the first-ever government representative pay it a commemorative visit.

[3] That a distinct sense of confrontationality inheres in the concept of *meydan* is also traceable in such Turkish-language idioms as *meydan okumak* (to challenge; literally: to read *meydan*) and *hodri meydan!* (I dare you!).

Figures

[Figure 1] The site of the arson attack as seen a couple of months after its transformation into the Science and Culture Centre (*source*: the author).

[Figure 2] The Science and Culture Centre's Memory Corner (*source*: the author).

[Figure 3] The site of the arson attack as seen on 2 July 2012 towards the end of the annual commemoration held in central Sivas by those upholding the victims' legacy (*source*: the author).