

An Analogy of Metropolis “Istanbul” As a Big Machine

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Abstract

What does one do in a metropolis with dozens of business towers, huge and luxurious shopping malls, hotels, conference centers, sports complexes, airports, endless construction sites, highways, bridges, sub-sea tunnels, cars, busses, and metros? What does one think to do in a city with a population of more than tens of millions, receiving constantly immigrants from all over the country and from the neighboring countries, constantly increasing housing and nourishment expenses, inaccessible parks and streets in dangerous hours, traffic congestion nightmare, and overcrowded schools and hospitals? Romantic responses are ready to give. Cosmopolite structure, vibrant cultural activities, “amusement” facilities, rich employment opportunities, freedom! Central and local administrations, urban planners, architects all work and spend too much effort, time and money in order to make those metropolises more attractive, livable and investable. Speculative costs, magnitudes and sizes of projects sweep one of her/ his feet. There are numerous stakeholders generating illusion to make us feel more independent, freer, and more powerful. But, what does one produce except earning for mortgage and installments? What happened if one cannot serve more for the functioning of this giant artifactual machine? Do the lives of individuals designed and devoted to the continuity of this machine to work value also on their own without taking a part in? Honestly, what does this machine produce? Just to had asked all these questions, over the analogy of big cities as big machines, the metropolis Istanbul, where emancipation and possession, and potential and border have intertwined, will be investigated.

Keywords: mega-machine, metropolis, Istanbul

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Introduction

The idea of making the analogy of Istanbul as a machine comes from the famous book of the great thinker and scholar Lewis Mumford “The Myth of the Machine”. He introduced the machine concept to the civilizations and argued that the first machine was social – the early kingships. The king, with the promise of protecting his people from the enemy, constructed the fortress and the community inside this fortress created the first social mega machine. From that time on, the community – the group of people- showed obedience to the rules of the kingship (Mumford, 1967). In this way, each single person in the kingship become nothing different than each single part acting according to the working principles of a machine. In a machine, the small parts doesn’t mean a thing on their own, but only function and do value if they serve to the whole and produce all together something useful. At this point, those questions arise: what is the whole? and what does this whole produce?

The ideas of Lewis Mumford, later on, have been accepted by many other thinkers. It was the political economists Prof. Jonathan Nitzan and Prof. Shimshon Bichler, who have introduced the machine concept to the capital itself. According to these political economists, today’s mega-machine was not anymore technical but financial. Capital itself has become the main organizing factor/ aspect of the daily life in the 21st Century (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009). This perspective has also constructed the main idea of resembling the biggest metropolis with a population of more than 15 million people of a developing country, Turkey, to a mega-machine.

Istanbul as a Big Machine

For what purpose do all the mega-infrastructures and crowd in the metropolises serve? I’d like to share the research results of an Istanbul based international technology company surveyed in Istanbul in 2017. According to the results of this study, white-collar’s favorite social activities in Istanbul were determined as follows: %47 shopping, %40 cinema and other cultural activities, %14 traveling, %19 sport, %10 finance-focused activities. And, the most socializing spaces of the white-collar’s were declared as follows: %41 shopping malls, %35 café’s, %31 restaurants, %18 events and activity spaces, and %8 gyms. (Blesh, 2017). The dominance of shopping activity, and the consumption of culture at cinemas and at other cultural facilities, again the consumption of prepared food and sports greet the eye. And this shows that the giant metropolis “Istanbul” functions as a consumption machine. Its inhabitants consume apartments in gated communities, cell phones, TV’s, cars, cloths, and even cinema and other realms of culture as in all the other metropolises of the World. Here I’d like to quote Mumford saying “by fashion and built-in obsolescence the economies of machine production, instead of producing leisure and durable wealth, are dully cancelled out by the mandatory consumption on an even larger scale.” (Mumford, 1961). So, what about leisure and durable wealth? We work for six days a week just to make one day off. Or, we work for the whole year just to make one week holiday. The smallest – useless part- of the giant mega machine - a human being- devotes the majority of his/ her lifetime to his/her work or to banks to pay mortgages and loans.

All the machines are designed and produced for some specific purposes. One purpose is, for sure, to make the single parts useless. So, the aim becomes to weaken their

power, making their connection be left apart. But there is another purpose bigger than that. This giant urban consumption machine is owned by a proprietor and there are his/her continuous interests and benefits. The owners of all these urban infrastructures – the capitalists – owns the machine and the machine produces capital.

So, it is considered necessary to ask four basic questions by making comparison with the early kingship times as introduced by Mumford and today in order to enlarge and understand the machine concept for the 21st Century's metropolises. The first question is about the ownership. Who owned the machine in the past – in the early kingships and who owns the machine today? Of course, it was the king in the past. So, the responsibility has been taken by the king. The group of people, who obey the rules of the kingship and work for its benefits and interests, were totally aware of hierarchy and authority. However, today, the owners of the machine – the capitalists-, the owners of shopping malls, business towers, finance companies, banks, giant groups, hotel chains, biggest film studios, biggest food and drug companies, creates an illusion and demonstrates an abstract ownership of power. So, we are not aware anymore the ruling class or the power possessors. It seems like there is a liberal free market economy, and everyone is free to choose how to live, what to buy, to whom to vote, by whom to be governed. The unclear image of authority, however, doesn't make the authority absent.

The second question is about the smallest part of the machine. In the past, it was the community/ group of people inside the fortress constructed for the king. But today, it has become the individuals, each of whom has different earning, spending and consuming habits. So, it needs to be more complex control mechanisms now compared to the past. The individuals, who surmise that they are independent and free, should be and are controlled not by any violence anymore.

The third and maybe the most important question then becomes the main ruling mechanisms of the machine. In the past, it was the threat of death, and the enemy. With the promise of protecting the community from the enemy and death, the king has convinced them to stay inside the fortress and obey his rules. And today, the fear of failure, and the fear of being nothing/ a loser has become the ruling mechanism of the machine. Obedience extraction mechanisms work on a volunteer basis. The fear of pain and the promise of pleasure creates this voluntariness. Today, nobody forces any individual to spend and consume more. The individuals devote all of their lives willingly to their patronage, to banks and inevitably to capitalists.

The last question is about the production of the machine. In the past, in the early kingship times, the mega-machine has produced the power/control to rule. But today, the machine produce the common sense, the voluntariness to consume. All the advertisements, icons, social media figures, vloggers, bloggers serves for the creation of an imagery.

Conclusion

Change is continuous and inevitable. The fears, the pleasures, the controlling mechanisms and the controlling actors change all the time. Nowadays, the artificial urban environments; which gives an impression that without our diplomas we are nothing, or that we worship steel, cement, concrete and internet; make us think that maybe there is a need for rural revolution. However, another revolution can make only another mega-machine come into being. There is no point to search for breaking the machine? Is it something breakable anyway? Instead of looking for something big, we should work on the very small details. Raising individual awareness, consuming carefully; and planting own food, building own house, and sewing own cloths shouldn't sound nonsense. We must learn to be ok on our own and to feel enough. Even though we don't share Instagram photos, we don't attend opening ceremonies, displays, galas, and even though we don't buy new things every single day, we could feel that we're whole and we're ok. Sometimes, just noticing a mistake makes us correct that mistake. Or sometimes, when just a reliable doctor says we're going to be ok, we start to feel much better. We don't have to be approved by this mega-machine all the time. We can approve ourselves. We should learn to trust our own intelligence, body and mind. This could be the only way to stop to be a small useless part of the urban mega-machines in the giant metropolises.

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