

“DON’T DESPISE US!”: ADDRESSING THE IRRELEVANCE OF THE VULNERABLE IN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to develop a novel insight into Hannah Arendt’s socio-political theories in order to examine and alleviate the socio-spatial exclusion of the vulnerable by greater society. It utilises Arendt’s classification of the terms ‘communal’ and ‘irrelevant’ as a pair of opposing concepts in which the state of ‘vulnerability’ is associated with being deemed to be ‘irrelevant’ within society. The study addresses the exclusionary qualities of public spaces by focusing on the complex relationships observed between these concepts in Turkey through a content analysis of 35 national satire magazines and 30 YouTube channels that reflect on various states and perceptions of vulnerability in Turkish society and culture. It concludes with a series of recommendations by which to close the gap within the communal-irrelevant duality that could enhance vulnerable individuals’ urban rights.

Keywords

vulnerability, public space, social exclusion, urban democracy, media review

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Without a doubt, Hannah Arendt is the central political thinker of this century whose work has reminded us with great poignancy of the lost treasures of our tradition of political thought, and specifically of the loss of public space, of *der öffentliche Raum*, under conditions of modernity (Benhabib, 1992, p. 74).

1. Introduction: Vulnerability, the Public Sphere, and Hannah Arendt

Vulnerability was defined as “a matter of being under threat of harm” by Goodin (1985, p. 110). This definition argues for the protection of those under threat and incorporates the assumption that harm can be prevented. From Arendt’s (1998) point of view, vulnerability stems from human nature and permeates every aspect of human life. There are two immediate propositions which stem from these points. First, those who are under threat of harm and have been deemed vulnerable through their condition of inhabiting a city include not only people but also non-human members of society existing in public spaces. Second, it is important to recognise that there are states of vulnerability that are not the result of human nature, but shaped by the environmental factors in which humans and non-humans exist. In this complex web of realities, the existence of individuals and society in urban spaces requires individuals to be able to benefit from the rights offered by space (Soja, 2010a). Consequently, circumstances in which an individual’s right to the city is violated create socio-spatial conditions that put them in vulnerable situations (Mitchell, 2003). This is one of the states of vulnerability that does not originate from human nature, contrary to Arendt’s arguments, but emerged later in the public sphere due to external factors.

Arendt’s view of the public sphere necessitates a review of her counterpart, the public sphere theory of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’ theory is based on an analysis of the structure and dynamics of capitalist societies and is dominated by concepts of ideology and hegemony revolving around capitalism (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). Since its initiation in the early 1960s, the theory has received numerous criticisms, most of which were accepted by Habermas himself (Calhoun, 1992; Thompson, 1993; Susen, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the most crucial criticism targets Habermas’ suggestion of the public sphere as a mediator between society and state where the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1974). However, the society-state emphasis overlooks the fine details of the dualities and conflicts that exist within society in everyday life, whereas the latter assumption pertaining to public opinion undermines the different expectations and needs of members of society. Arendt acknowledges and attempts to understand these conflicts and the variety of aspirations related to them:

By “the rise of the social” Arendt means the institutional differentiation of modern societies into the narrowly political realm on the one hand and the economic market and the family on the other. . . Arendt sees in this process the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer “act” but “merely behave” as economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 74-75).

This study critically engages with several different states and addressees of vulnerability and the social and spatial conditions that trigger their so-called state. In so doing, it adopts Hannah Arendt’s analyses and other relevant works as a basis of discussion. The emphasis on vulnerability sheds light on the overarching realities of today’s society in that it reveals the conflicts and power imbalances that result in the socio-spatial exclusion of vulnerable individuals and groups. Among others, Arendt’s major theoretical work, *The Human Condition*, and her antimodernist arguments around existentialism in the public sphere are central to the arguments of this study as they offer a seminal philosophical basis for the discussion of dualities taking place in the public realm. For the purposes of this study, this is translated into public space as the physical ground that hosts the communal existence and dualities of society.

Ali Madanipour (2010) opens his book, *Whose Public Space*, with the following sentence: “Public spaces mirror the complexities of urban societies” (p. 1). The public sphere is, in a way, made up of the existence, relations, and reflections of the things and people that constitute it. However, not all members and relationships within this sphere are equally reflected and represented socio-spatially. In the public sphere, the presence of a person allows them to question the reality between themselves and the world and to ensure the reality of the world. Arendt (1998) defined the public realm as the common world; however, there are also emotions, expressions,

and even individuals and social groups that cannot find a place within it. She associated an individual's ability to relate to the common nature of the world, that is, the state of being prudent, with the ability of the concrete and subjective senses to relate to the objective world and thus to others, and described this state as "common sense" (Arendt, 1961, p. 221). It follows that the diversity in question includes vulnerable groups and individuals that sometimes cannot get their share of this common sense or find a place in the public sphere. On the inclusivity of the public realm, Arendt (1998) speaks of the great danger that arises from the existence of people who are forced to live outside the common world, and the exclusion of the imperfect from the public realm; such imperfection automatically becomes a private matter. In Arendt's approach, imperfection, which had become a private matter and was excluded from the commonality of the public sphere, was expressed as *irrelevant*. In contrast, the state of being accepted and existing in the public sphere, which is not a private but a common issue, embodied by Arendt's definition of the *common world*, is expressed with the *communal*. This study brings together the concepts of *communal* and *irrelevant*, as distinctively coined by Arendt as a pair of binary concepts, and examines them with reference to their exposure in Turkish media in which public space is discussed.

In a broad sense, this paper attempts to engage in a discussion of the ways in which society can or cannot claim its collective rights and satisfy its needs in urban space while at the same time maintaining democracy by allowing both diversity and the inclusion of members with various needs and vulnerabilities. More specifically, it aims to understand the extent of, and reasons for, the hardships that vulnerable individuals tackle in their everyday lives. Another objective is to suggest a direction by which to alleviate these hardships through filling the gap of a deserved emphasis on the vulnerable populations in the urban democracy literature. To this end, the following section provides a literature review of urban democracy with an emphasis on the right to the city and the other main socio-spatial debates that exist around it. The discussion ties into the communal-irrelevant binary by addressing the vulnerabilities experienced within greater society in public spaces. Next, the study delivers an in-depth analysis of the vulnerabilities experienced in the public sphere—in public spaces in particular—in order to understand the extent and conditions of *irrelevance* of the vulnerable as opposed to *communal* over the case of Turkey through a review of select online and print media. Turkey is an interesting case study as the politics of vulnerability in Turkish society is claimed to be increasingly antagonising over vulnerable populations due to national and global politics (Tambar, 2014; Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, 2016; Sözer, 2021). The paper ends with further discussion that offers research and policy recommendations to address the irrelevance of the vulnerable in the public sphere and space, whilst also offering an alternative insight into the urban justice and democracy discourse.

2. Democracy and Space: A Brief Review

In its simplest expression, democracy, whose precise meaning depends on whether an observer focuses on the individual or the collective, is a form of political control. Since increases in the population of a city gradually increases the complexity of its economic and political life, the purest form of democracy is only possible with a small social population (Mumford, 1961). It follows that, as population increases, limitations specific to democracy arise. In representative democracies that have moved away from the pure and essential form of democracy, the most prevalent form of government today, equality between citizens before the law and the sovereignty of the people are essential. In democratic forms of government, political control and direction lies either in the hands of the people or is provided by representatives elected by them. The idea of the sovereignty of the people brings together concepts such as equality, justice, freedom, and independence, which together define and complement democracy in ways that transcend mere representation.

Individuals in modern democracies, in addition to their normal civic responsibilities, are also candidates for leadership. Aristotle (1999), who in his *Politics* developed his definition of democracy from the perspective of individual citizens, associated the conditions of being a good citizen in society with both being governed and having the political ability to govern. Another discourse that prioritises the responsibilities of individuals in democracy comes from Popper (1947), who emphasised that individuals, i.e. the citizens of a democratic state, should be blamed rather than democracy for the political inadequacies in their (respective) state. Democracy not only shapes individuals and therefore society with the responsibilities that it imposes, but also takes its shape from the society in which it functions. The knowledge, abilities, and good citizenship of the members of a given community shape a society and thus its democracy. Although many philosophers have emphasised

the uniqueness of the social aspects of human existence, whether individual or collective terms, Aristotle and Plato did not consider the inability to live outside of a community a human-specific behaviour; on the contrary, they argued that human life shared a collective nature with animal life, and that our social nature is thus far from peculiar (Arendt, 1998). Whether unique to our species or not, communal existence requires existence in a concrete place.

The interactions and relationships which are established with the space in which we live in or with any other concrete place, and in Arendt's approach, with the *common world* in the public sphere, has infiltrated every aspect of life, bringing with it various expectations and discussions. Madanipour (2003) explains, "the spaces around us everywhere, from the spaces in which we take shelter to those which we cut across and travel through, are part of our everyday social reality" (p. 144). The state of social reality which Madanipour describes is formed by an aggregation of social existence and spatial behaviour. Thus, he relates an understanding of all social components in life to that of space and relationships in space. Individual spatial behaviours, which are defined by surrounding spaces in various ways, are an integral part of social existence, and people's understanding of space and spatial relations is the same as an understanding of all other components of social life. Such forms of understanding also bring along various subject expectations and searches. The spatial response of the continuous and ongoing social life that exists in urban contexts has brought along a search for rights in various forms in urban affairs. The relationship that democracy establishes with space, as well as issues of individual and collective rights arising from this relationship, which are the focus of this study, emerges at this point.

The idea of collective rights in urban affairs calls for justice, democracy, and inhabitants' rights by emphasising the need of populations that are negatively affected by urban conditions. One of the most influential and elaborated upon urban collective rights' concepts of the last half a century, the right to the city, is a right to change the means of socio-spatial life by changing the city according to society's will. It is far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies; it is a collective right because changing the city actually requires a collective and organised power over the processes of urbanisation and a resultant restructuring of public space.

The right to the city originated as a response to the individualistic world of capitalism as a collective right. It was Henri Lefebvre who introduced the concept in the 1960s in relation to the movement of 1968 in France. Lefebvre (1991), who defined space as a product of history, described the right to the city as a requirement of democracy and directly associated it with humanism. Space, in addition to being described as a historical production by Lefebvre, is also classified and defined according to the ways of production and existence. According to his approach, *lived space* is a kind of combination of *perceived space*, which is objective and materialistic, and *conceived space*, which is an internalised subjective representation, that brightens up experiences of everyday life. It follows that they are in a state of coexistence and reproduction of each other for all residents of urban life (Waite, 2023). Harvey (1993) highlighted the dynamic relationship of space with society in his exploration of the subject, and touched upon the dynamics of societal and spatial relationships, and claimed that spatial form is created at society's discretion. He emphasised different human behaviours and experiences and suggested that instead of asking what space is, we should instead investigate how it is that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space (Harvey, 1993). Harvey additionally associated the right to the city with living in it, and argued that those living in the city directly or indirectly contribute to the production of urban space and that these contributions are associated with the claim of a right to the city which one inhabits (Harvey, 1993). The right to the city differs from conventional enfranchisement, which came with democracy, in that it empowers the residents of the city, because it is a right gained by living the routines of daily life in the city and is for its inhabitants (Purcell, 2002). In this case, in addition to human practices, the practices of non-humans who are residents of and shape the city should share this claim. The comprehensiveness of the definition of the right to the city should be examined from this perspective, and the subjects of the practices that constitute that right should be taken into consideration. Democracy and its participants, which restructure and reproduce public space in modern societies, redefine urbanisation processes with the collective and organised power that it requires.

Harvey (2003) points out that the organised collective power necessary to claim the city through its alteration is quite beyond the capacity of individuals or individual rights: the realisation of the right to the city demands

claiming such a shaping power in an essential and radical way. Likewise, Lefebvre claims that the right to the city should involve a continual and active process of appropriation (in the sense of use rather than ownership) of city spaces (McCann, 2002). According to Lefebvre, it is a right to be claimed from privileged masters in order to democratise the city's spaces (Lefebvre, 1996). The underprivileged inhabitants of the city who must claim this right in large part comprise vulnerable individuals and groups; in other words-and as borrowed from Arendt-the *irrelevant* members of the society. These demographics, often especially underprivileged, deserve the particular interest they receive in this study.

3. Seeking Vulnerabilities in Public Space: An Investigation of Print and Social Media in Turkey

This study explores the relationship that exists between democracy and space and the communal-irrelevant binary as it pertains to vulnerability in society through a content analysis of print and social media in Turkey. Various states of vulnerability within the public sphere across Turkey were compiled based on the typology of the main vulnerability groups in social sciences literature (Turner, 2021), with each group being well represented in the literature and in the Turkish context. 12 vulnerable groups were examined in this study: women, LGBTQI+, children (aged below 18), the elderly (aged 65 and over), the disabled, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, immigrants, refugees, the poor, the homeless, and non-humans.

3.1. Methodology

In order to reveal the communal-irrelevant binaries in Turkish society, this study's investigation involved in-depth interviews with vulnerable individuals published online, and critical humorous perspectives, mainly satirical, published online and in print form. The interviews were retrieved from several channels of YouTube, which is a major social media organ that serves as a widespread reflection of contemporary critical thinking, while the satire particularly focused on caricature magazines which have been an important print tool of a centuries-old tradition of satire in Turkish society (see, for example Brummett, 1995). In order to enable a thorough review of recent coverage, the research focused on matter from the last ten years; 2012-2022.

The YouTube search consisted of two stages: a preliminary search with the Turkish equivalents of the words for the 12 abovementioned vulnerability categories to identify all channels associated with vulnerabilities, and an overview of the interviews published in channels relevant to the research topic. In the search for relevant satire works, a Google search was conducted which combined the Turkish equivalents of the same vulnerability keywords and the word "caricature," followed by a preliminary screening of the search results until they were exhausted. From this, 15 channels and 30 interviews were identified on YouTube, whilst a total of 35 print and online satire magazines were identified and examined within the specified date range. In the content analysis conducted on these sources, YouTube broadcasts discuss the experiences and perceptions of vulnerability at the individual level through interviews and documentaries, while the caricatures analysed address the socio-political aspects of the vulnerability phenomenon through the lens of vulnerable groups. Out of these, the focus lay on the cases in which various challenges for the abovementioned *irrelevant* vulnerable groups arise in relation to the rest of the society, or in other words, the *communal* public sphere. As such, priority was given to narratives taking place in public space, while all encounters analysed took place in different urban settings within Turkey.

3.2. Findings

The following vulnerability-based findings are relayed in no categorical order; however, associative vulnerability categories of gender, age, and socio-economic status are listed to consolidate associations and intersectionality across different vulnerabilities. The accounts with disclosed full names are the self-declared names of the interviewees in their overt participation in public YouTube contents, while the vulnerabilities they are categorised in are self-identified states and types of vulnerability.

3.2.1. Women

The media review started with the different states of vulnerability that women encounter in their daily lives. On one YouTube channel which was comprised of a series of interviews held in Istanbul's Kadıköy district revealed that, when asked about their conditions in Turkey, women generally complained that they do not have equal rights with men in their families, social environments, and work lives, or in the public sphere (DW Türkçe, 2019). In the words of one interviewee examining the vulnerability of women in Turkish society, "it is difficult to work and live in this country, where even laughing is difficult." In the work titled "I'm afraid of Istanbul – Woman," a young woman described the anxieties, threats, and fears she experiences in the public spaces of Istanbul and posed the question, "Have you ever calculated every step of your daily life just to feel more secure?," referring to the bothersome experiences she has undergone simply because of her gender (140 Journal, 2017). In one example pertaining to the exclusion, discrimination and bullying experienced by women featured in caricatures, the women-exclusive 'pink bus' service in Malatya was criticised from a male perspective (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Cover of Uykusuz Magazine, dated 25 May, 2017

In Malatya, a special pink bus for women was established.

Man 1: If she gets on this bus instead of the pink one, she's definitely a slut.

Man 2: Why would she get on the mixed bus otherwise? She knows what she's doing...

3.2.2. LGBTQI+

The documentary entitled "Don't look at me that way" discussed LGBTQI+ individuals' inability to be and act like themselves and live fearlessly, as well as the human rights violations that they had been exposed to (Karataş, 2013). In this work, LGBTQI+ individuals stated that the main problems they experienced in public spaces were their exclusion and lack of fundamental rights that result from being seen as abnormal. They also complained that these issues prevent them from even voicing their concerns effectively. The LGBTQI+ individuals interviewed also stated that they wanted to be able to be open about their love wherever they are and whenever they feel like it, and that they wish to experience their feelings freely, and not be seen as different or inappropriate. One transgender woman described the involuntary life she leads because of the treatment she had received in the public sphere as being "alive but walking around dead."

Another piece of content examined was the documentary entitled "To be of my partner's gender" about the life of an LGBTI+ individual in his twenties (Pamuk, 2014). Speaking on the difficulties he experienced in Gaziantep due to being LGBTI+ and his reluctance to go to school because of peer bullying, İbrahim Aksoy mentioned that he was excluded from public space by society, and that any assertion that LGBTI+ individuals exist and are a part of larger society was seen as inappropriate. In another documentary entitled "Beyoğlu's stepson: Tarlabası," which was filmed in Istanbul's Tarlabası quarter, the vulnerability of LGBTQI+ individuals is dealt with by examining their lives alongside the spatial transformation that Tarlabası has undergone (Tatlıcan, 2012). According to this work, while LGBTQI+ individuals were excluded from most public spaces in the 90s, it was possible for them to live and survive in Tarlabası. When evaluated with reference to terms of inclusiveness, Tarlabası has become a more inclusive place than most for LGBTQI+ individuals, and is somewhere where diversity is more easily accepted. The social and physical changes that this urban space has undergone in subsequent years has also deeply touched the lives of these individuals.

3.2.3. Children

According to the media review, the main issues associated with children in the public sphere that were mentioned are the fears that children feel and their perceived and actual lack of security, including risks of kidnapping, sexual abuse, and peer bullying (CNN Türk, 2018). These fears are amplified in children when combined with other vulnerabilities such as homelessness or underage labour. One of the examples examined in this context was a set of interviews with children living on the streets waiting at traffic lights in Kağıthane, Istanbul (CNN Türk, 2018). Berfin, who is only 6 years old and lives a life with little feeling of safety as a result of the vulnerability of being a child in an urban public space, earns money on the streets by selling napkins and sundries. When asked about her life on the streets, she mentioned her fears of theft and kidnapping. She argued that the money she earns could be taken by force, and that she is therefore ready to run away at any moment. Another remarkable media sample examined was a documentary about street children addicted to drugs; addiction being an additional vulnerability experienced by those persons in addition to their being children (Öztürk, 2020). One child who began to live on the streets after the disintegration of his family stated that he could use drugs in hidden areas and therefore lived away from the public. He did not establish relations with larger society and this had led to a completely isolated life. Child labourers, whose existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated by dire social, economic, and political conditions, have also found their place in various caricatures (for example, see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A caricature by Sefer Selvi in Evrensel Newspaper, dated 20 November, 2020
 Woman: If you were reincarnated, what would you like to be?
 Boy: A child...

3.2.4. The Elderly

It has been observed that the vulnerability of the elderly in relation to society and public space is very similar to that of children; they are viewed as emotional and naïve, in addition to their relative physical frailty and generally more limited capacity for movement. One news report related the story of a couple aged between 65 and 70 living in Antalya who were defrauded of their money by a swindler who exploited their guilt and religious beliefs (Sözcü Gazetesi, 2020). The unconscious attitudes and vulnerabilities of these elderly individuals in public spaces were perceived and used as an opportunity for deception.

In another example, a 65-year-old woman living in Istanbul was swindled when a woman approached her while she was out shopping in an open public space, asserted that she knew her, and offered her help and money (Show Ana Haber, 2020). Instead of giving aid, the fraudster stole money from the elderly woman's home. This report is just one of countless examples of elderly individuals who have their money being stolen through the exploitation of their religious feelings, and/or the abuse of their goodwill.

3.2.5. The Disabled

In the documentary "The connected" filmed in Yalova, interviews examined the social and physical difficulties that disabled individuals experienced in public spaces (Özyurt, 2020). One interviewee, 70-year-old Şerife Şahin, was orthopedically disabled. Despite her age and disability, she worked a job that required physical ability, and met all her needs by herself. She spoke of her love for the nature and people of the place where she lives, as well as how she still felt marginalised due to her vulnerability. Her statement, "People should not look at the disabled with pity," reflected on the state of inconvenience she felt in public spaces when two parties share the commons of life. Another interviewee, Yasin Sabri Şenyüz, a 27-year-old mentally disabled man, had never had a job due to his condition, so he helped his mother at home. He states that he is uncomfortable with

the pitying glances he received in public spaces and defined his condition not as being a disabled person but, rather, a “special” individual. Seben Ayşe Dayı, a 30-year-old woman featured in a different documentary, was born with cerebral palsy (+90, 2019a). A trained journalist and an educational anthropologist, she expressed her vulnerability and exclusion in the following terms: “Actually, we want common sense and respect, for everything to become ordinary and be accepted as it is.” Instead of escaping public spaces, she wanted to be within them and to be seen by society. She also wanted to feel as though she lived in the public space as well. To this end, she emphasised the importance of public spaces when it comes to their enabling communication between the disabled and larger society (also see Figure 3). However, she also noted with regard to the inconvenience of the physical conditions of public spaces that, “roads are like a minefield!” As a result of such inconveniences, public spaces are not her preferred place to socialise, and she usually have to spend more time at home or in shopping malls.



Figure 3. A caricature by Önder Önerbay, awarded at the Barrier-Free Izmir 2018 National Caricature Contest: Let's Remove the Barriers (left); and a caricature exhibited in “Accessible Caricatures” in 2013 in cooperation with the Manisa Municipality in Turkey and the Caricaturists Association of Turkey (right)

3.2.6. Ethnic Minorities

In a documentary series called “Roma Tunes in Beyoğlu” that focused on the Roma people’s neighbourhood and social life in the vibrant district of Beyoğlu, Istanbul (Municipality of Beyoğlu, 2013), Bülent Altınbaş, a 40-year-old clarinet player, exemplified social exclusion in his not having been admitted to a musical conservatory solely because he was a member of the Roma community: “Am I not a human? [There should be] no discrimination, as everyone is an equal servant of Allah.” In addition to being excluded from public spaces, he highlighted several social rights violations such as being deprived of education that the *communal* can vastly benefit from.

Despite their relatively large numbers, estimated to be between 15-20 percent of the total national population, Kurds have historically been subject to ethnic, social, economic, and spatial exclusion within Turkey (Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015). In an interview published on YouTube, Heja, a Kurdish journalist from Diyarbakır, discussed the prejudices and difficulties that she had faced as a Kurd and expressed her fear of the comments that might be left on the video’s page (321GO, 2020). She stated that she was perceived as ignorant in Istanbul when she moved there from Diyarbakır in her childhood. Among the biased questions she faced were “Is there a tailor in Diyarbakır?” and “Do you Kurds eat pasta?” In her collage years, she claimed to have been exposed to nationalist rhetoric by some professors simply because she was Kurdish. Heja noted that she hoped for an associative democracy in Turkey: “I think that the more people embrace, the more dialogue they can have, the happier they can be, and that peace can be achieved in this way.” She added: “I have learned over the years that people are afraid of what they do not know, and this brings along those racist thoughts and prejudice.” She referred to the manifestations of social exclusion that had emerged as a result of the *communal*’s fears and prejudices that have accumulated over several years and generations and how these were reflected in public space.

3.2.7. Religious Minorities

In an interview on Jewish youth living in Istanbul, lawyer Betsi Penso expressed her thoughts on the attacks that had occurred on Jewish synagogues: “We have experienced bombings here. Maybe White Turks have the same feeling right now, but we have been living this for a very long time, so it is not something new” (+90, 2020a). Considering the synagogues as well as open public spaces of the city in general, she noted that she saw Istanbul as her home but increasingly considered leaving, like others of her generation, due to the experiences she had suffered with regard to antagonism and polarisation.

The largest religious minority within the mostly Muslim Turkish population is that of the Alawites, an ethnoreligious group that emerged from Shia Islam and recently numbered between 25 and 30 million persons in Turkey, according to Professor İzzettin Doğan, the President of the most prominent Alawite foundation in the country (Independent Türkçe, 2021). Speaking about her late husband, the prominent Alawite folk poet Nesimi Çimen, who was killed in an arson attack in 1993, the Sivas Madımak massacre, Makbule Çimen said in an interview: “The fire in my heart never goes out. That flame is still burning” (Bana Göre TV, 2020). When asked how she perceived being an Alawite in Turkey, she referred to the words of her husband: “Let a human be a human. Burning people for religious reasons is not being Muslim. As an Alawite, loving people is what I worship.” Attacks on the homes of the Alawite have also been a recurring theme in Turkish history and the subject of satire magazines (for example, see Figure 4). In Çimen’s interview, in addition to the marginalisation and exclusion of this religious minority group in their social lives in public spaces; an emphasis was also placed on the attacks extending to the Alawites’ homes and the extent of the hostility displayed.



Figure 4. Cover of Penguen Magazine, dated 2 August, 2012

*The house of an Alawite family was stoned and its barns burned following a quarrel over a loud midnight Ramadan drummer in Malatya.
Man: What are we burning?*

3.2.8. Immigrants

Immigrants, another vulnerable group, were examined in a YouTube video about families who immigrated from the Ottoman periphery to Turkey (+90, 2021). In this series of interviews, Professor Pinar Uyan Semerci, the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Bilgi University, described the founding of the Turkish Republic as “a story of establishment through immigration.” Descendants of the members of the state-sponsored population exchanges of the early 20th century, who largely define today’s Turkey’s immigrant profile, were also interviewed in the series. One such person, Esat Halil Ergelen, President of the Lausanne Emigrants Association, described the multi-faceted exclusion that immigrants have faced in Turkey and added: “The reason behind this othering is the political resistance of the immigrants to the desired new order.” Ayşe Kulin, one of the prominent authors of modern Turkish literature who was also born of an immigrant family, emphasised the importance of recognising the supposedly lost former identity of immigrants: “Most of the time, people leave their homes, homeland, and lands unwillingly. That is why it hurts me a lot to see people look down on immigrants. It is necessary to accept a person who settles in a country and becomes a citizen as a child of that homeland.”

In another series of interviews about African immigrants trying to survive in Turkey (DW Türkçe, 2020), Muhammed Sierra Lioneli described the exclusion he experienced in public spaces and argued that he was publicly called “black” by some people, seen as vulnerable by others, and has even been exposed to threats and violence. A Nigerian man named Pascal, who wanted to earn his living playing football, stated that although he was very successful in the trial games of several different football clubs, he was not accepted only because he was “different” as an immigrant marginalised by and segregated from other segments of society. According to these accounts, which reveal various aspects and reasons as to the exclusion of immigrants, the places where exclusions are embodied have included public spaces throughout history.

3.2.9. Refugees

The issue of refugees, which has been an important issue in Turkey since the early 2010s, has been a topic of particular concern for the country’s larger cities. In a YouTube video that discusses controversial opinions about Syrians in Hatay, a city in southern Turkey with a high concentration of Syrian refugees (DW Türkçe, 2022), Syrian Mustafa Ekreme responded to the negative image of his community by local people: “Not all the fingers of a hand are the same size. Let’s not assume that all Syrians are bad. Everyone is different.” In this video, in which all Syrians interviewed on the streets of Hatay gave similar answers, the city’s mayor appeared worried about the supposed change in the demographic structure of the city. Şahap Fansa, a local tradesman in the historic Hatay bazaar, expressed a different view: “France could not conquer Hatay; how can three or five Syrians?” He viewed these concerns as “mere provocation.”

Another story that narrated the post-war migration process from Afghanistan to Europe included interviews with immigrants who had come to or were passing through Turkey on their way to the west (BBC News Türkçe, 2021a). One of these immigrants, an Afghani named Yunus, linked his decision to his treatment in his home country: “There is no respect for people in Afghanistan. In Europe, people are respected. That’s why we want to go to Europe.” However, in another video, an Afghan immigrant woman’s words contrasted with this view concerning immigrants in Turkey: “I came here with these kids. They need to get an education. [The government or people of Turkey] didn’t even give us a place to live” (BBC News Türkçe, 2021b). While comparing the countries they left as refugees and migrated to, the interviewees emphasised their peaceful approaches in their social lives and how this contrasts with the treatment they received as human beings.

3.2.10. The Poor

Socio-economic differences have generally been understood to directly bring about exclusion in public spaces and exacerbate individual vulnerabilities. The media scan undertaken for this paper suggests that the impoverished lack a relationship to such spaces because a certain amount of disposable wealth is necessary to experience these areas.

In one documentary, Mehmet Suat Doğan, a sanitation worker in his 40s, described it in an interview as a miracle that he could survive in Istanbul, adding: "Many of my friends around me are families that are broken or in distress, just like me. I can't sit down and chat with someone, because I see myself as inadequate due to my financial hardships" (BBC News Türkçe, 2019; also see Figure 5). Another YouTube video contained an interview about being a *hammal* (porter) in the wholesale marketplace in Istanbul's Bayrampaşa neighbourhood (+90, 2020b). A 40-year-old man explained that being a porter is equivalent to being nothing and complained that he was not able to make any connections in public due to his outlook. He responded to the contempt of members of society with the words "We are human beings, we have rights, but no one extends to us these rights, they oppress us." In both examples, individuals attributed the reasons for their inability to exist in public space to be a consequence of the inadequacies caused by their financial situation and, therefore, to the othering that they were subjected to by other people.



Figure 5. Cover of Uykusuz Magazine, dated 12 March, 2015
 Man 1: In the last year, we have become twenty percent poorer.
 Man 2: Brother, I am okay... I can't get poorer than this.

3.2.11. The Homeless

The scanned media demonstrated that while the homeless are often the primary occupiers of public spaces at night, they are excluded, looked down upon, and marginalised during the day. Moreover, while the homeless are much more vulnerable to the dangers of living constantly on the streets than other segments of society, they are ironically perceived as stained individuals to be feared and avoided.

An interview with 62-year-old Alaaddin Arslan, who lived in the streets of Tophane, Istanbul, revealed that he had been homeless for 35 years (+90, 2019b). In Arslan's words, "society is disgusted by people lying on the street, and this is one of the biggest things that hurt us in our hearts." He also emphasised the dangers that the homeless experience in public spaces, stating that when confronted by drug addicts, they are even more vulnerable and at times even in mortal danger. He added that the homeless cannot benefit from public health

services, to which every member of society should have access. The documentary “Being Homeless: Life on the Street” about the life of a 51-year-old dweller of the streets of Alanya named Sinan reminds the greater society: “Don’t despise us people living outside! There are good people among them. Try to support them” (Beta Video, 2020).

3.2.12. Non-Humans

Reflecting on stray dogs and cats, the most prominent animal species within the vulnerable non-humans category in Turkey, Banu Aydın, an animal rights activist and owner of a dog shelter in Istanbul, warned about stray dogs in Turkish cities: “These [animals] also deserve good families, animals that have already suffered a lot, stray dogs, abandoned animals, most of them traumatised. This one was either beaten or tortured (pointing at a dog). For example, there is a dog in the middle that I will show you. She was raped many times, it’s proven. But the man paid 300 Lira, got out of jail, and left” (BBC News Türkçe, 2020).

In this study, significant elements of the built and natural environments facing extinction were also analysed as being non-human. In a post concerning interviews with activists defending the Validebağ Grove in Istanbul, which is subject to a planning amendment in favour of mixed-use development (DW Türkçe, 2021), Arif Belgin, one of the volunteer advocates, called for the grove’s preservation: “A wide variety of animals, from turtles to hedgehogs, from lizards to grasshoppers, from squirrels to snakes, lives here. It has a natural ecosystem. This is a rare blessing for Istanbul. It is very important to preserve it in this way. It is extremely wrong to build facilities here.” Another activist, photographer Ahmet Dayıoğlu, expressed his sadness over the now lost oak trees of the grove which had resulted from current developments in the area: “There used to be a squirrel family in every oak tree living here, now there is only one family left.”

The built environment, and in particular the historical and architectural heritage it holds in cities, is another non-human element that has become vulnerable because of the contemptuous approach of interventions such as some of the urban transformation and renewal projects in major Turkish cities. It follows, that there is also a need for them to be scrutinised. In a post in which the urban transformation of the city of Bursa, often referred to as “Green Bursa,” was described as “a mortar stuck in the heart of Bursa,” a local and urban planner, Gizem Kıyıcı, stated that the transformation that the city had undergone lay far outside Turkey’s sustainable redevelopment agenda (+90, 2020c). Referring to the old Central Bank building, which is located in Bursa’s historic core and is being demolished as part of the Çarşıbaşı Square Renewal Project, Kıyıcı stressed the defencelessness of built heritage against political power: “This building was built in the 1960s and reflects the character of its modernist period very well. To this effect, it received the National Architecture Award of the Chamber of Architects and is also in the conservation cultural assets inventory of Bursa.”

4. Research and Policy Implications

Research has indicated that a relationship with society in public spaces subjects the vulnerable to social exclusion, invisibility, fear, insecurity, and uneasiness due to pressures from the non-vulnerable counterpart. These conditions worsen depending on the type and combinations of vulnerability and, in the case of children, the depth of vulnerability often increases alongside physical fragility; worsening experiences of harm and victimisation in the social environment. This brings to mind Goodin’s (1985) aforementioned definition of vulnerability, which associates the term with harm and threat. Relating such conditions to Arendt’s depiction of the terms *communal* and *irrelevant*, these reflections equate vulnerability with being deemed unaccepted, or *irrelevant*, by society, while *communal* refers to the majority who are accepted by society and have power over their counterparts. However, defining the *communal* based on its population size compared to that of the vulnerable should be a secondary focus. Arendt’s words regarding this point offer valuable insight: “What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (Arendt, 1998, pp. 52-53). Consequently, what leads to the exclusion of vulnerable minority groups from public space is not their quantity, but the attitudes and behaviours of other individuals with whom they share the public space towards them. The media review suggests this to be the case for the women, immigrants, and stray animals analysed; vulnerable groups that are greater in number than many other vulnerable groups observed in several Turkish cities (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, 2016; Wolf; 2015).

The spaces encountered during the media review were actually *lived spaces* according to Lefebvre's definition (Soja, 2010b). While living—whether actually residing, working, or just passing through or running daily errands—in an urban space, the dynamics that emerge as a result of social relations have the power to transform a designed street, a square, or a park through perception. In turn, these dynamics reform space with aspects that trigger the perception of each individual (Soja, 2010a; 2010b). It follows, that social exclusion is translated into spatial exclusion over time and is exercised by both the communal and the irrelevant—the vulnerable—in public space as long as the vulnerable refrain from claiming their right to the spaces from which they have been excluded (also see Mitchell, 2003). The question then is, is the right to the city, which Lefebvre (1991) refers to as central to both humanity and democracy, not a right of vulnerable individuals in fragile situations, as well as every individual living in the city?

From a theoretical point of view, this question has been addressed rather indirectly by Harvey: Those who live there, that is, those who contribute to the living spaces of the city and the experiences lived in the city, are the legitimate owners of the right to the city and can claim the production of urban space and life (Harvey, 1993). However, the broad categorisation of urban inhabitants that Harvey frames lacks a necessary emphasis on vulnerable individuals and groups. It is undeniable that the *irrelevant* contribute as much to the production of urban life and ongoing social relationships in the socio-spatial sphere as the *communal*. Therefore, in urban policy-making, vulnerable individuals and groups must be specifically emphasised as legitimate owners of the right to the city, regardless of the type and severity of their vulnerability.

In order to address the question above, it is also necessary to investigate the specific needs and expectations of vulnerable individuals. One common theme that arises from this research is that no matter where their vulnerability stems from, all the vulnerable individuals analysed wanted to be accepted and loved and, in turn, to positively contribute to the rest of society without being seen as different because of their so-called peculiarities. This was the case with the LGBTQI+ individuals, the ethnic minorities, the migrants, the poor, and the homeless in particular. Arendt's statement that "the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" helps to illuminate why vulnerable groups tend to take to the streets and persist despite all the exclusionary elements of public spaces (Arendt, 1998, p. 50). The concrete existence of individuals is expressed through their presence and visibility in these spaces (Madanipour, 2010), so it is imperative that they are maintained through policies that restructure public spaces. Provided that every human and non-human is accepted by society as is, including their strengths and weaknesses, and that this diversity becomes common and accepted, then the duality between the *communal* and the *irrelevant*, as well as their reflections in social relationships, can be unravelled in public space. Under such conditions, the vulnerable will be less likely to feel isolated, insecure, or under threat in the process of realising themselves in public spaces.

5. Conclusion

Keeping in mind the framework of spatial relations in democracy in relevant literature and the principles of relevant theories as well as the appropriation of vulnerabilities within this framework, this study investigated the socio-spatial relations that different social groups and non-human members of society establish within public space. In order to understand the extent of, and the reasons for, the hardships that vulnerable individuals face and tackle in their daily lives and to suggest directions to alleviate these hardships, this study bridges Arendt's *communal* and *irrelevant* as a binary system and ties it to vulnerability and public space, offering alternative insights to existent urban justice discourses.

The relevant media review made it clear that, in Turkish society, vulnerable groups are not only viewed but also treated as *irrelevant* by the *communal* in the public sphere. As such, vulnerable individuals and groups perceive themselves as *irrelevant* through society's lens. Although their locations and types of vulnerability differ, their experiences and relationships with and in the public sphere show significant indications of social and spatial exclusion. Whether they bear an innate vulnerability or environmental factors and rights violations have made them vulnerable over time, vulnerable groups members coming into contact with larger society in public spaces can be strongly associated with the former's exclusion. In contrast, the un-labelled remainder of society acts as a monolith that claims power over the public sphere and spaces through collectivity. The communal-irrelevant

pair is a binary of opposite and conflicting elements in this sense. On the one hand, the generally assumed ways in which democracy manifests itself in space are that space provides opportunities and convenience for each individual to realise themselves, both as individuals and as members of any group co-inhabiting society, and that space has the capacity to include each without any spatial or social discrimination. On the other hand, space is only democratic to the extent that different social groups can use it equally and fairly without feeling or being assumed to be communal or irrelevant. It is also required that these groups should be able to relate to the space in different, free, and unique but consented ways. This study has demonstrated that vulnerable groups are associated with the production and reproduction of urban life from both perspectives; thus, they can legitimately claim their right to the city. Ensuring social and spatial justice to all legitimate owners of this right—human and non-human—is a requisite for urban democracy to exist and to enable society to claim its collective rights and needs. Therefore, in the practice of urban democracy, communities must realise the socio-spatial inclusion of their vulnerable members that are deemed *irrelevant*. As long as the vulnerable exist in public space—and they will exist—, there is reason to hope that both they and their legitimate rights will be recognised, deemed relevant, and ensured for the sake of social and spatial justice.

Note

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