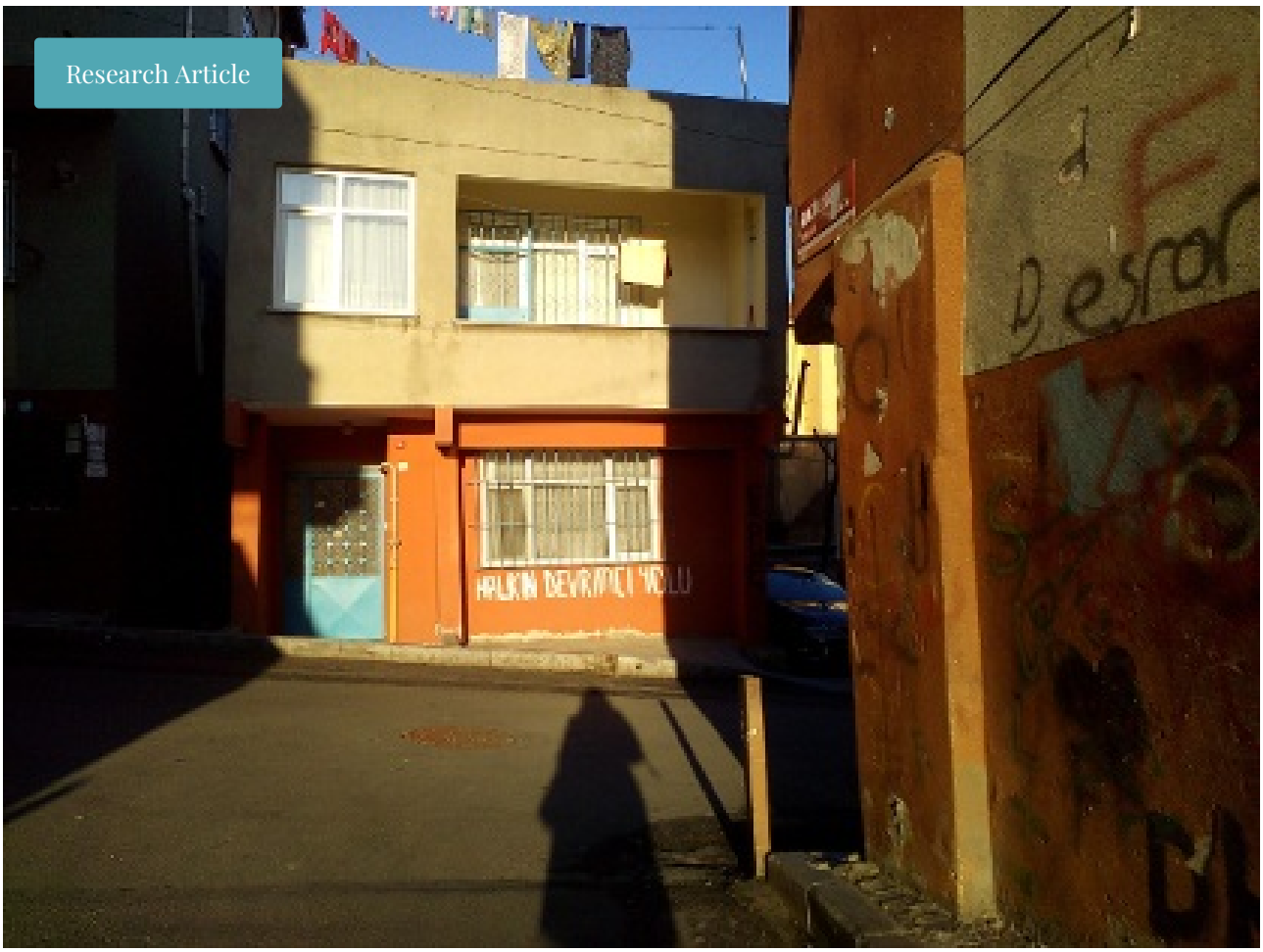
Urban Matters



(Dis)Locating fieldwork: relational approaches to research through a contested neighbourhood in Istanbul

May 13, 2022

Issue: Dislocating Urban Studies

Clara Rivas Alonso

Introduction

In the following short intervention, I question the way fieldwork is constructed and how the role of the researcher as the performer of fieldwork can be destabilized if we pay close attention to how we share vulnerabilities with our research subjects. Through that act of dislocating, both researchers and their methods can be held accountable, offering a grounded, relational analysis of how research builds its own objects of inquiry. As I will eventually show, the complex set of power relations between researcher and researched are better acknowledged when considering the connections that precisely blur those boundaries. I draw from my experience of researching practices of resistance to urban transformation in the neighbourhood of Okmeydanı, Istanbul, as part of my work as a PhD student at the University of Leicester.

I first discuss the reasons behind my choice of research case before introducing Okmeydanı briefly. I then go on to discuss how the methodology reflects the relational focus of my project, which allows me to unpack the ethnography and methods such as the interview as deeply complex processes that allow for the "locating" of the fieldwork, identifying the researcher and the researched as co-constitutive actors of that process. I finish by acknowledging the importance of research accountability and the impact of inequalities in the power relations established through the fieldwork.

"The field" and I

At a conference in Madrid recently where I presented my work, someone asked me why I had chosen Istanbul. After an interesting debate on issues of positionality, she was clearly looking for a candid response (the implied question was how a Spanish person from a UK institution ends up researching Istanbul). I went on to explain that I had lived there prior to my research, and that I cared a lot about the friendships I had established and the place itself. After the session was over, the question lingered in my head. I kept thinking of other answers I could have provided her with. This is what I have come up with so far: Istanbul's condition as southern megacity offers rich layers that intertwine the history of an empire, its social, cultural and economic decline, a late but all-embracing acceptance of urban capitalism. Its particular take on neoliberalization of spaces make it an important case study, especially if we are to answer postcolonial calls for going beyond the usual suspects in urban studies (Robinson, 2002; Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2015).

But I would not be completely honest if I did not mention my personal reasons to research Istanbul, namely that I also research Istanbul because it's easier than letting go. I'd rather continue being connected to it, by any means available. In my case, this implies investing intellectual and emotional energy, on top of a self-inflicted degree of precariousness as a self-funded student. And, as I hope it becomes clear in what follows, the Istanbul I have known, lived and researched, is the city that gave me a home, lifelong friends and eventually the opportunity to become a researcher. Furthermore, the burden imposed on the city through the kind of authoritarian urbanism promoted by the current government is directly related to the experiences lived by myself and those who were/are close. This kind of urbanism engages in spatial financialization whilst reducing dwellers' participation

and centralizing decision-making processes (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2022). Researching resistance in these conditions exposed me directly and indirectly to the strains and mental health pressures consequent of an authoritarian regime. This experience feeds into my own conceptualizations of survival, resistance and resilience in ways that I believe reflect the complexity of the subject and does justice to my own experience of researching Istanbul. This paper thus reflects my own personal journey as a researcher, a woman, a friend, a teacher, a partner and eventually a mother (all these subjectivities reproduced at one time or another through the relationships with dwellers); indeed "there is no such exterior observational point" (Barad 2003: 828). It is through this reflection on my own experience as a researcher that I dislocate my perception of the "field" to allow me to locate my actions "within it".

Okmeydanı

Okmeydanı, located in the symbolic peripheries of Istanbul inasmuch as it is geographically central but highly stigmatized, is a site of historical often violent struggle for existence. A central neighbourhood in the European side of Istanbul, this informal working-class area has for years seen violent clashes between the state and those widely perceived by mainstream media and politicians as radical leftists and terrorist groups. Faced with the latest threat, in the form of a government-led urban transformation project, the neighbourhood re-assembles itself to widen the horizons of possibilities available for its dwellers.

The neighbourhood was established in the 1950s as workers arrived from Anatolia. They eventually brought their families with them as Turkey began to industrialize. With nowhere else to live (without the state providing for them), these workers built their own houses, called *gecekondu* (Erman, 2001), around the carved stones that were used as archery target stones. Dwellers have historically fought for formalization of their homeownership, which local governments have at times complied with. Nevertheless, many dwellers are *still waiting* for their title deeds (see Sakızlıoğlu, 2013, for the destructive impact of waiting in relation to displacement).

Currently, Okmeydanı is a dense multicultural working-class area since the low houses (*gecekondus)* were replaced by apartment blocks that reach up to nine floors. Over the years, more groups of displaced people arrived: Kurds escaping the destruction of their villages in the southeast during the 1990s, different groups of precarious workers (such as African, Afghan and Uzbek refugees) and during the fieldwork period (first half of 2016) hundreds of Syrian families. Its central location, cheap rentals and hundreds of textile workshops (mainly providing informal employment) attract workers in precarious situations.

At the same time, dwellers in Okmeydanı are often described in relation to criminal activities (terrorists), ethnic-origin (Kurdish) and religious/cultural belonging (Alevis). The Alevi, considered a liberal Islamic sect, make up around 20 percent of the population in Turkey (Erman, 2001, p.1000), and yet, Alevism is far from a neutral concept, as a historically stigmatized social group (Yonucu, 2018). Even though minorities are not

accounted for through the national census, they are estimated at anything between 10-30 percent of Turkey's population (Yonucu, 2018). Kurdishness has been historically mobilized to repress, persecute and inflict violence on different groups of populations in Turkey; impossible to define (see van Bruinessen, 2016), it is outside of the scope of this intervention to try to do so in a few lines. Most importantly, and following Pérouse's (2017, pp.199-204) analysis that sees the Kurds of Istanbul as a highly heterogeneous group, the Kurdish urban question in relation to Istanbul involves forced migration from the East of the country to escape state repression and finding (and negotiating) rootlessness, poverty and labour precarity. The area has been policed heavily since the 1970s/80s. Through this constant state surveillance (in the shape of special police armoured vehicles, CCTV, helicopters and water-cannon trucks, among other urban strategies), violent repression and stigmatization Okmeydanı is reproduced as a terrorist den (Demirtaş and Şen, 2007; Gönen and Yonucu, 2012; Pérouse, 2015). On top of all this, the latest threat to the neighbourhood has materialized in an urban transformation project that would displace thousands of dwellers.

Locating the "field"

The onto-epistemological proposition which underpins my analysis draws on Barad (2003, p.829): "The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and non-human, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse" (Barad, 2003, p.829). This reflection aims at valorising relationality, mainly for its fruitful compromise with processes rather than essences, and for how it necessarily undoes binaries, in this case, epistemology and ontology. It is worth investigating Barad's proposal further, since, as I show below, research (and researcher) can never be disentangled from its object/subject of study. Relationality thus also implies accountability: "(…) the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of "exteriority within." This is not a static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries—that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability" (Barad, 2003, p.803). As I intend to make apparent below, holding research(ers) accountable also allows for the widening of the object of study as constituted through relations, enacting them and constituting research and researcher in the process.

From January until the end of June 2016, I was able to carry out fieldwork in circumstances that were somehow trying: my closest friend and host was being investigated for signing an Academics for Peace declaration, a declaration calling for peace in the southeast of Turkey and that saw its signatories persecuted (see Human Rights Watch, 2017, report for further information). This meant that I was probably being surveyed too, as part of her circle of friends. There had been several terrorist attacks in Turkey throughout the year, which changed my habits and the way I conducted research. I avoided the underground whenever possible, central areas such as Taksim, crowded places and markets. This generated a level of anxiety I tried to manage; I kept weekly contact with my supervisors and administration in the department, who, as part of the risk assessment process required me to send in a weekly plan with my appointments, meetings and general daily

whereabouts, which might have done the opposite to offsetting anxiety. My fieldwork was thus being reproduced through the institutional management of risk.

As I focused on carrying out an ethnography, I tried to find a place to live in the neighbourhood. It proved difficult, as the demand was high, tenancy agreements would last a year, and as a perceived single European woman, I was usually frowned upon. At the same time, I had been given access by an activist friend to one of the members of the local association, on the condition I would offer something to the dwellers in exchange. This condition, which I accepted, directly stemmed from attempts at stopping researchers from profiting from the unbalanced power relationship with their subjects of research. Dwellers feeling overexposed and exploited through relationships with researchers was a phenomenon in Istanbul. The local association against the urban transformation project also functioned as a neighbourhood solidarity space, providing support to those in need locally. I volunteered helping with logistics and teaching English to local and Syrian children.

I was offered a room at a local family's home, living with their young son and the family's grandmother, and the relatives who frequently would visit them throughout the day. Through my relationship with them, my work as a researcher and volunteer teacher, and my commuting to and from my teaching job, I was able to build my own trajectory as a neighbourhood (temporary) dweller, a troubled and at times confusing, still a privileged experience of dwelling in a contested place. Though Koch's (2013) question remains: "And who are 'you', the researcher, and what is your role in the power relations of these various closed contexts around the world?" (Koch, 2013, p.391).

A collective "us" was used as a way of legitimizing belonging. I was many times included in that "us": "You're one of us"— though there was no fooling anyone here, as there were other ways people had to remind me that I was not one of them, but I was mainly included in plenty of conversations, actions and organisations and overall made to feel always welcome. In the case of my host family, "us" had even more of an inclusive character: we shared intimate space and negotiated our ignorance of each other with curiosity, humour and comparison. I for them, just like them for me, were finally complete strangers holding on to acts of generosity and trust. It is critical to point out that I was not doing an ethnography of their way of living as a family, but of the neighbourhood under threat. In this sense, I do not mobilise as data their everyday intimate moments and spaces, but I do mobilise their interviews and the ways that they (we – though violence does not have the same weight when the possibility of leaving is there, as it was for me) were subjected to violence, as an important constitutive part of belonging in Okmeydanı.

There was a nagging question: what risk was I putting them under through my presence there? Deeply aware of the crackdowns happening at all levels at that time, I worried persistently about the consequences if they or I were to be questioned, even if we were not engaging in any activity considered as illegal, the random ways of applying (in)justice were unpredictable, therefore a source of worry. I believe their hosting was a genuine act of generosity that mirrored their engagement with the neighbourhood. What I eventually understood is that they thought it was me taking the risk by being there (in fact, the risk

was pervasive, in Istanbul, Turkey and everywhere else). As my dear friend and colleague Sandra Annunziata[1] and I argued elsewhere, accepting our involvement in ethnographies through our "flawed personalities" (Annunziata and Rivas Alonso, 2020, p.63) allows us to acknowledge the consequences of a deep immersion. Indeed, "the researcher only ever gains partial insight" (Lees, 2003, p.110), and mine was deeply rooted in these relationships forged during my stay in Okmeydanı.

Dislocating methods

If, as Law (2004) states, methods "participate in the enactment" (2004, p.45) of the realities they focus on, their historical value as valid representation (what he calls *in-hereness*) of life (*out-thereness*) needs to be questioned: "If we think this way then reality, realities, take on a different significance. No longer independent, prior, definite and singular as they are usually imagined in Euro-American practice, they become, instead, interactive, remade, indefinite and multiple." (2004, p.122)

Urban ethnography "(…) gets us closer to understanding the ways people interpret and experience the world." (Lees, 2003, p. 110). Yet, Andrews (2013, p. 2) warns "of the danger in othering particular communities and therefore reinforcing myths of deviance that we should be seeking to dispel." The need to further problematize binaries of oppressor/oppressed, researcher/researched, needs to be attended to, as finally my object of enquiry, the everyday life (of Okmeydanı), is not so clearly classified: "Parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity." (Law, 2004, p. 2).

Ruth Behar (1996) describes the journey of doing ethnography as deeply embedded in the subjective trajectory of becoming: "At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful" (ibid, p.3). The idea of fieldwork, as defined by the methods put to work to collect data as a journey, enables us to understand it as an open-ended proposition with clear temporal implications inasmuch as fieldwork is directly affected by the temporalities of research itself. One that if really built relationally, takes into consideration structures of feelings with emancipatory potential.

When data becomes *unbound* and feelings and affects are allowed to count for something, the analysis becomes richer, multi-dimensional, accountable and somehow truer to the messiness of entanglements and the situatedness of the researcher as part of them. Furthermore, it allows for the so-called researched to be considered active actors of the reality to decipher. What is the spatio-temporal role of an interview in this landscape of collective reproduction? I take that moment of interviewing as a particular moment of exception, where time is readjusted as the present moment of the ethnography, a pause for reflection directly affected by the conditions allowing it to take place, and yet directly related to the perceptions of the past and the future allowed to be called upon and be present. Borer's (2010, p.109) conceptualization of the present allows me to re-imagine the interview not only as a mere act of data collection, but as a tool to modify the space-time continuum of the process of neighbourhood formation.

Furthermore, "when doing research, much of what we can learn and know about another arises within the intersubjective space between researcher and co-researcher. Each touches and impacts on the other, and that affects how the research unfolds. In this 'opening between' lurk ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability; anything can, and does, appear" (Finlay, 2009, p.2). This phenomenologist relational approach unlocks the interview as a mere tool of data gathering and pushes it *beyond* (again) towards the onto-epistemological proposals of *making things strange* (drawing on Sheppard, Leitner and Maringanti, 2013, p.895), of situating me (ourselves) in relation to others (the researched) in a constant state of becoming through difference.

And then there is intuition

My field was thus reproduced through the ethnography and the interviews I carried out. But it was through this practice that it also became dislocated. I used participant observation, photography, videos and sound recordings whenever I could, in order to enrich the Okmeydanı I was accessing through interviews. I did this as I was confronted by how "(…) ordinary life is excluded for the duration [of the interview]. And so too, we suggest, noise" (Hall, Lashua and Coffey, 2008, p.1024). Often, interviewees provided a version of the answers sought by me, a version deeply influenced by circumstances such as who was listening, what was the current political climate, at what stage of the process of organizing a demonstration they were, what they thought I wanted or needed to hear, to mention a few factors.

The search for patterns was not part of the initial project design:

Note that they [patterns] both receive and they transmit. Picking up on a faint pattern, they make it stronger. They condense and manifest a version of reality, but as they condense it they re-enact it, they re-confirm it. *Method always works not simply by detecting but also by amplifying a reality.* The absent hinterlands of the real are re-crafted – and then they are there, patterned and patterning, resonating for the next enactment of the real (Law, 2004, p.116).

The way Law (2004) refers to emerging patterns resonates with the way my method was developed. Midway through my period of fieldwork, I had somehow noticed those patterns around me, proving again how much of an emergent entanglement being engaged with the fieldwork could be, and as an intuition I started to try to capture them through recordings. It was done tentatively, without a clear objective, but trusting a certain suspicion that following those sounds would take me to somewhere more concrete eventually, but more importantly would open up the field itself, going beyond the initial strategies that had been designed far from Okmeydanı (in Leicester) and to a certain extent totally detached from its reality. As Hall, Lashua and Coffey argue (2008, p.1037), we need to take into account "the significance of the sonic world as open, perhaps especially so in all its ephemerality and everydayness, to qualitative inquiry". Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), they go further in their critique of the interview (not to obliterate it, but to complement it) when they argue that the interview is entrusted with providing insights into the ordinary thoughts and actions of people (Hall, Lashua and Coffey, 2008, pp.1023-

4), and how this is simply too much to ask from such a medium.

Conclusions

My fieldwork had thus become dislocated through my own ethnographic journey. I left Okmeydanı to stay at my friend's apartment for the last days before taking a plane to Madrid. I did so as stress levels were becoming unmanageable, so I decided it was best to leave the neighbourhood. Leaving the neighbourhood was awkward, bitter-sweet and uncertain, and leaving them behind also translated into searching for ways to keep in touch. Had it all been *only* fieldwork? Certainly not, and yet, leaving meant building a boundary, a clearly marked before-and-after none of those involved were able to escape. I have kept in touch with some of the people I met during this period, especially my host family. Yet, there is the reality we had to face when I left: I was not one of them, and me leaving was the abrupt realisation of that. Things would never be the same again, and we knew that.

I have tried to tackle through this paper some of the complexities of researching contested time-spaces whilst positioning myself as the flawed foreign woman researcher that not only collects data occurring "in the field" but in fact acknowledges the difficulties of being part of that world-in-becoming and her role in partly reproducing it. This also has allowed me to account for the way my vulnerability intertwined with others', acknowledging the imbalance of power in that arrangement, as a key aspect of the resistance and surviving to state spatial and temporal disciplining in a seemingly ever-worsening environment. We're all part of the onto-epistemological projects we draw, and what's more, it is in the identification of the unequal power relations that the emancipatory prospects are realised.

---

[1] She passed away suddenly in January 2019, and was my close friend, colleague and writing partner.

References

Andrews, K. (2013) 'The possibilities and dangers in urban ethnography', *The Sociology Teacher*, 2(3), pp. 9-11.

Annunziata, S. and Rivas Alonso, C. (2020) "Everyday resistances in gentrifying contexts" in Murru, S. and Polese, A. (eds) Resistances: Between Theories and the Field, Rowman & Littlefield International.

Barad, K. (2003) 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', Signs: Journal of Women in Culture andSociety 28(3): 801-31.

Behar, R. (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Borer, M.I. (2010) 'From Collective Memory to Collective Imagination: Time, Place, and Urban Redevelopment', *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(1), pp. 96-114.

Demirtaş, N. and Sęn, S. (2007) "Varos Jdentity: The Redefinition of Low Income Settlements in Turkey." Middle Eastern Studies. 43(1):87–106.

Ergenc, C. and Yuksekkaya, O. (2022) "Institutionalizing authoritarian urbanism and the centralization of urban decision-making", *Territory, Politics, Governance*, DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2021.2020156

Erman, T. (2001) 'The politics of squatter (Gecekondu) studies in Turkey: The changing representations of rural migrants in the academic discourse', Urban Studies, 38(7): 983-1002.

Finlay, L. (2009) 'Ambiguous Encounters: A Relational Approach to Phenomenological Research', *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 9(1), pp. 1-17.

Gönen, Z. and Yonucu, D. 2012. "Legitimizing Violence and Segregation: Neoliberal Discourses on Crime and the Criminalization of Urban Poor Populations in Turkey." In Lumpencity: Discourses of Marginality | Marginalizing Discourses, edited by A. Bourke, T. Dafnos and M. Kip, 75–103 Ottawa: Redquill Books.

Hall, T., Lashua, B. and Coffey, A. (2008) 'Sound and the Everyday in Qualitative Research',*Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(6), pp. 1019-1040.

Human Rights Watch (2017) Turkey: Academics on Trial for Signing Petition. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/05/turkey-academics-trial-signing-petition (Accessed: 8 May 2021).

Koch, N. (2013), Introduction – Field methods in 'closed contexts'. Area, 45: 390-395. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12044

Law, J. (2004) After Method: Mess in Social Science Research, Abingdon: Routeledge.

Lees, L. (2003) "Policy (Re)Turns: Gentrification Research and Urban Policy–Urban Policy and Gentrification Research", Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 35(4): 571–574. https://doi.org/10.1068/a3504com

Lees, L., Shin, H. and López-Morales, E. (eds) (2015) Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement. Bristol: Policy Press.

Pérouse, J-F. (2015) 'Okmeydani: A Targeted Territory', Jadaliyya, 14 April [Online]. Available athttp://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21373/okmeydani_a-targeted-territory (Accessed 6 May 2015).

Robinson, J. (2002) 'Global and world cities: a view from off the map', International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 26(3), pp. 531-554.

Sakızlıoğlu, B. (2013) Inserting temporality into the analysis of displacement: living under the threat of displacement, Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie, 105(2): 206-220.

Sheppard, E., Leitner, H. and Maringanti, A. (2013) 'Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto',*Urban Geography*, 34(7), pp. 893-900.

van Bruinessen, M. (2016) 'Erken 21. Yüzyılda Kürt Kimlikleri ve Kürt Milliyetçilikleri' [Kurdish identities and Kurdish nationalisms in the early twenty-first century], in Aktoprak, E. and Kaya, A.C. (eds.) 21. Yüzyılda Milliyetçilik: Teori ve Siyaset. Istanbul: İletişim, pp. 349-373.

Yonucu, D. (2018) 'Urban Vigilantism: A Study of AntiTerror Law, Politics and Policing in Istanbul', International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 42, pp. 408-422.

Authors

Clara Rivas Alonso

Postdoctoral Researcher » Sciences Po

Dr Clara Rivas Alonso successfully defended her Human Geography PhD thesis 'State-led gentrification and time in Okmeydanı, Istanbul: Resisting uncertainties through everyday solidarities' at the University of Leicester, UK, and under the supervision of professor Loretta Lees. She carried out an ethnography of a deeply contested informal urban space, the area of Okmeydanı in Istanbul, threatened with a state-led gentrification project and historically subjected to stigmatization and multi-faceted violence. Originally Spanish, she worked and studied in London since 1999, where she completed a BA in Humanities and History at Birbeck College, and an MA in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy at Goldsmiths College. She has also lived in Istanbul, Addis Ababa, Abu Dhabi and now Paris, taking all these opportunities to reflect, and when possible, write about, constantly changing urban forms and the emancipatory possibilities of urban life.