

Cross-Scale Transactions and Multi-Level Governance on Spatial Gains of Commons: A Comparative Study from Türkiye¹

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Abstract

In the current era of intersecting global crises, crisis discourse has evolved to encompass holistic and inclusive frameworks. Terms such as “planetary crisis,” “Anthropocene crisis,” “Capitalocene crisis,” “polycrisis,” “meta-crisis,” “cumulative crisis,” and “technological crisis” reflect the multidimensional nature of these challenges. These crises manifest across multiple scales and generate profound social, political, economic, and spatial transformations. This study takes the 2008 global crisis as a paradigmatic moment and examines the social movements in Turkey that have catalyzed radical spatial and political change. It investigates how actors operating at different scales have responded to spatial interventions, the dynamics of cross-scalar interactions, the spatial gains achieved through these struggles, and how these gains have reshaped the meaning and character of space.

Keywords: Governance, scale, Cross-Scale transactions, commons

1. Beyond Scales

Brenner describes the crises that capitalism entered after the 1970s as “creatively destructive” and endorses Lefebvre’s concept of explosion. He emphasizes that restructuring at all spatial scales is implemented through processes of “destruction and creation” (Brenner, 2003). These practices are referred to as “restructuring,” but these processes are unstable and polarizing. Neoliberalism’s fundamental restructuring slogan is carried out through the creation of space, capital, and hegemonic spaces. This is done through ideas such as “localization, glocalization, decentralization, expansion of spatial networks, new regionalizations, and learning regions,” as well as through practices involving these ideas. Such terms and practices, including those that place socio-spatial restructuring processes at the geographical level within a hegemonic perspective, have been identified (MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2004).

In urban space debates, the scale of the city reflects the material organization of capitalist processes. Urban scale, shaped by diversification under capitalism, gains meaning not in isolation but through its relationship with broader geographical scales (Giordano, 2003). Today, rural areas are increasingly framed as resources serving urban functions. The urban-centric face of capitalism masks extractive operations—mines, landfills, and fields—now restructured as rural production zones (Cash et al., 2006).

Modern capitalism operates across multiple scales—local, regional, national, and global. These scales are not fixed; rather, they are shaped by contested political and economic relations. The social movements that emerged in the 1970s were, in essence, movements that challenged these scales, opened the way to produce alternatives for restructuring, and introduced a new dimension to the debate on scaling (Brenner, 2019). The issue of scale has been a subject of discussion in various disciplines of critical urban studies since the 1990s, with a focus on socio-spatial relations. Castells (1977) conceptualizes the city as a “collective consumption space,” while Baudrillard (2017) defines it as a “showcase for consumption objects,” a stage for simulation and hyperreality. Despite their divergent theoretical approaches, scholars who conceptualize cities as sites of consumption posit that urban space constitutes more than merely a physical structure; rather, it is a social arena in which economic, cultural, and social relations are shaped. Consequently, it is imperative to conceptualize space as the aggregate of social relations and processes, necessitating the adoption of a socio-political perspective in this regard. Discussions regarding scales are generally defined as “local, regional, national, global,” and this definition expresses the spatiality of capitalist production relations and these relations. These spatialities establish connections between

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disparate geographical regions due to the heterogeneity of production activities, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities across geographical areas (Termeer et al., 2010; Gibson et al., 2000). Consequently, the differentiation and inequalities between production and consumption spaces both differentiate and expand scales (Smith, 2017). As the situation progresses, diverse forms of engagement emerge at both the national and local levels. Conducting analyses based on specific geographical scales results in the rejection of dynamic processes involved in these forms of engagement. The rejection of these forms of interaction has been demonstrated to contribute to the escalation of conflicts at various levels. For instance, national policies restricting local policies, and place-specific dynamic factors have the potential to intensify existing conflicts. Because of this relationship, spaces become a shared arena for these conflicts (McCann, 2016).

Crises and conflicts that are caused directly by human activity at different spatial scales have global impacts. Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014) identify “planetary urbanization” as the primary cause of these issues and propose the implementation of multi-scale governance models as a solution to address these spatial crises and conflicts. The most significant roadmap for creating this alternative is predicated on the spatial and political gains achieved through social struggles. The challenges encountered in shared spaces have been shown to offer a novel spatial perspective and a new ontology of politicization in the creation of this roadmap and the development of a new alternative (De Angelis, 2017). In this novel ontology, relationality, processes, and inquiries concerning human-nature relations are rendered accessible through a “multiple perspective” (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). The concept of “commons,” which emphasizes inter-scale and even inter-level interaction and reciprocity, offers an important conceptual framework and highlights the “use value” in all spatialities (Akbulut, 2018).

2.Commons and Scales

The concept of the commons entered academic discourse with Hardin's (1968) “The Tragedy of the Commons,” which argued that shared resources such as forests, oceans, and pastures are inherently prone to overuse unless privatized or nationalized. Ostrom (2002) challenged this view, demonstrating that local communities often develop effective, context-specific governance models and that problems typically arise from external interventions. She framed commons as spaces where collective rights and decision-making emerge, constituting a sphere beyond conventional public-private binaries (Angelis & Harvie, 2017). As such, commons became a conceptual response to complex environmental challenges involving multi-level governance (Bakker, 2007). The underlying cause of this conflict stems from the efforts of various actors, such as institutions, community interests, political identities, and different civil society organizations, to participate in these processes (Brenner, 2019). A subset of these initiatives prioritizes safeguarding the space and the human and living communities that collectively constitute the environment. A secondary set of initiatives underscores the utilization value of the space to maximize its economic return.

Critical approaches extend beyond Ostrom's bounded definition, drawing on Lefebvre's (2015) concepts of “transforming life by transforming the city” and the “right to the city”—an assertion of society's collective authorship of space (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Angelis & Harvie, 2017; Stavrides, 2019). Within this literature, the commons is understood not merely as a resource or an economic alternative, but as a political project enabling social reconstruction and cross-scalar interaction. Within this literature, the commons is understood not merely as a resource or an economic alternative, but as a political project enabling social reconstruction and cross-scalar interaction.

The idea of commonality shows how a group works together. It also shows the important parts of a group's life and living space. The whole group can take part in decisions about these things (Bianchi, 2019: 80). In social theory, space is generally viewed as the ground for action and is treated as fixed and static. At this stage, time is regarded as an independent variable, while space is defined as a dependent variable. In social theory, Lefebvre redefines this meaning by approaching space as a process and revealing the dialectic between the social and the spatial. Lefebvre (2014) defined the spatial triad, referring to absolute space, sacred space, historical space, abstract space, contradictory space, and differential space. He studied these types of space through periodization, addressing changes in modes of production over time.

The historical process is defined as a combination of building blocks, not as the end of one period and the beginning of another. Common space is defined as an “alternative” social space that intersects with these processes and emerges in response to spatial practices during moments of crisis (Dardot & Laval, 2018).

Theorists of spatial scale argue that scale encompasses more than spatial or temporal metrics; it also refers to jurisdictional, institutional, and epistemic dimensions in today’s interconnected world (Cash et al., 2006; Termeer et al., 2010; Young, 2002). Social movements defending the commons operate across multiple scales, revealing that scale is not merely a geographical construct, but a political terrain shaped by governance dynamics and actor relations (Swyngedouw, 2004; Brenner, 2004).

Defending the commons typically begins at the local level, grounded in local knowledge (De Angelis, 2012). Yet such localized organization often links with national and global networks as struggles intensify and institutional pressure grows, forming a multi-level political transaction space (Cash & Moser, 2000). The widely cited principle of the commons—“belonging to no one and yet belonging to everyone”—captures the motivation behind these cross-level interactions (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). This networked, upward scaling fosters socio-political spaces rooted in community rather than capital, enabling the reclamation of space and the transfer of public goods and commons governance to local actors (Berkes, 2002). In this governance model, or practice of commoning, central and local governments are expected to operate independently of market forces, with decisions shaped by active local participation. However, upward involvement remains essential to preserve the heterarchical and self-managed nature of the commons, and to ensure lasting institutional outcomes (Brenner, 2019; García-López et al., 2021; Cash et al., 2006; Harrison, 2006).

3. Fields and Methods of the Study

The study examined social movements (rural and urban) carried out in Türkiye on different scales in 2008 and thereafter, as well as the actors of different scales with whom these movements established relationships during the process of achieving their gains. To establish the study’s scope, a media scan was conducted from 2008 to 2023 using the keywords “protest, struggle, urban movement, and environmental action.” This scan also encompassed related terms such as “resistance, action, and activism,” drawn from the digital archives of newspapers offering diverse perspectives, including liberal, right-wing, and left-wing viewpoints. Consequently, these scans have led to the identification of movements that have been met with public acclaim and have achieved success. The following examples illustrate these findings: A multitude of social movements have emerged in opposition to various development projects, including those involving the construction processes in Validebağ Grove, the planned mining activities in Kazdağları, the Çeşme Tourism Project, the Gerze Thermal Power Plant, the Düzce Hope Houses Cooperative, the Alpu Coal Thermal Power Plant, and the cooperative movement initiated by the BÜKOOP Consumer Cooperative concerning the spatiality of food.

A total of 125 interviews were conducted with local people, experts (planners, lawyers, academics, architects, doctors, engineers), NGOs (local, national, regional, and global), and local governments through semi-structured interview forms. These interviews were conducted directly at the sites between April 24, 2024, and May 28, 2024. The qualitative data were analyzed manually. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to understand the narratives. Recurring patterns, frames, and configurations were identified. These themes were then categorized around key conceptual axes such as interaction across scales, commoning practices, governance dynamics, and spatial gains. The comparison across seven cases allowed for tracing similarities and divergences in coalitions, resistance, and scalar politics. An interpretive model guided the analysis to uncover the embedded meanings, spatial strategies, and power dynamics articulated by actors.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Social Movements Against Development in Validebağ Grove

Validebağ Grove is one of the last remaining green spaces in Istanbul’s dense urban landscape. It is a first-degree natural protected site that hosts numerous historical structures (Akyıldız, 2019). However, it has been targeted for development under various projects, including religious complexes, parking areas, housing, and a “nation’s garden.” For the past 26 years, the local residents, professional chambers, environmental organizations, activists, academics, and experts from various disciplines have opposed these spatial interventions, demanding the preservation of the grove’s natural and cultural heritage. Throughout this lengthy struggle, collective practices have emerged, including prolonged vigils, events, forums, open-air classes, and spontaneous conversations at

petition stands, which have contributed to the commoning of the grove. Local actors integrated the protection of the grove and the capacity to swiftly respond to threats into their daily routines. After many years of legal proceedings, the public struggle ultimately prevailed. The Validebağ Grove movement is a significant example of defending the use value of a common space and reconstituting space as a socially produced entity. The ongoing struggle against various interventions has fostered an upward scaling of the commons through interactions among neighborhood, judicial, and global-level actors.

4.2.Boğaziçi University Members' Consumer Cooperative (BÜKOOP) – Istanbul

The Boğaziçi University Members' Consumer Cooperative (BÜKOOP) is an initiative that emphasizes the spatial nature of food, asserting that the local and spatial aspects of food production and consumption generate a commoning relationship. As a consumer cooperative, BÜKOOP organizes collective production and distribution based on principles of "clean, fair, and local food," serving as an important example of shared food and knowledge practices (Saydam ve Kadirbeyoğlu, 2019). Opposing the commodification of food by the capitalist system, BÜKOOP regards food as "common knowledge, common production, and common consumption." For the cooperative, the physical structure known as "BARAKA" had functioned as a common space where knowledge, production, and consumption practices were enacted. However, in 2022, the BARAKA was dismantled by an anti-democratic university administration, forcing the cooperative to relocate. Nevertheless, members viewed the new space as a platform for continuing commoning practices, where food and knowledge are re-produced daily. What began as a practice within the university has gradually developed relationships with producers and institutions at other scales, demonstrating an upward scaling interaction rooted in solidarity across levels.

4.3.Düzce Tenant Homeless Earthquake Victims Solidarity Housing Cooperative - Düzce

In the aftermath of the Düzce earthquake that occurred on November 12, 1999, housing assistance was exclusively allocated to property owners, thereby neglecting to provide support to tenants affected by the seismic event. In response to this inequality and the resulting housing crisis, tenant survivors formed a housing cooperative and initiated a rights-based struggle for housing (Yucak, 2004: 375). The local community constituted the primary actor in this movement, with subsequent participation from various NGOs, academics, and international networks. Following an extended period of legal proceedings, the plaintiffs successfully obtained the rights to allocate land for residential development. The design of the housing units was conducted collaboratively, with all cooperative members participating in the process. The project was constructed through participatory and co-design principles, and its implementation resulted in the creation of physical dwellings as well as the formation of a community-wide practice of commoning. The cooperative's organizational structure was entirely dependent on civil initiative and legal efforts, initially at the local level but eventually evolving into a model of upward scaling. The movement has established a multi-level governance model through both legal and organic ties with actors at different levels.

4.4.Social Movements Against the Gerze Thermal Power Plant – Sinop

A thermal power plant project that was proposed in 2009 in the Gerze district of Sinop aimed to cut down 16,000 trees in a region containing natural protected areas, forests, and agricultural land. The opposition to the project was initiated by the Gerze Municipality and the Yaykıl village leadership, and subsequently received support from villagers, ecological organizations, professional chambers, and NGOs and activists operating at local, national, and international levels (Kaymaz, 2017 ; Aldemir, 2016). Consequently, the project was terminated because of this determined and far-reaching social and legal struggle. A modest resistance outpost, erected on the site of struggle, was transformed into a symbol of collective memory. Subsequently, it was converted into a "resistance museum," thereby becoming a space for shared heritage. The Gerze example elucidates a commoning practice in which the use value of space was defended against market logic that emphasizes exchange value. This upward scaling movement offers a compelling illustration of cross-scalar interaction.

4.5.Social Movements Against the Alpu Coal-Fired Power Plant – Eskişehir

In 2017, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources unveiled plans for an underground coal mine project in Alpu Plain, a region distinguished by its exceptional agricultural productivity and situated within Eskişehir. The initiative was endorsed by substantial modifications to the urban planning framework. Local people, farmers, local authorities, NGOs, professional chambers, the Eskişehir City Council, and activists united in opposition to the coal plant, arguing that land is the foundation of life and that this polluting project should be canceled.

After public mobilization and legal proceedings, the project was officially terminated, thereby ensuring the preservation of the agricultural nature of the land (Temiz Hava Hakkı Platformu, 2018). The scientific reports, prepared collaboratively by experts from various fields, along with the detailed public information efforts, created a “knowledge commons” that enabled the space to gain collective value. The Alpu case exemplifies a top-down neoliberal scaling process initiated by the state. However, it also demonstrates a counter-intervention that was carried out through cross-scale collaboration among actors. This movement underscores the potential of commoning in counteracting neoliberal agendas that prioritize exchange value, thereby emphasizing the significance of use value in economic activities.

4.6. Kazdağları: Social Movements Against the Gold Mining Project – Çanakkale, Balıkesir

In 2010, environmental initiated protests gold mining operations near Kirazlı in the Kazdağları region, where approximately 350,000 trees were scheduled to be harvested for cyanide-based extraction. These demonstrations evolved to encompass local people and a diverse array of other stakeholders. The project posed grave ecological threats due to the area’s biodiversity and vital water resources (MAD, 2020). Beginning in 2010, the implementation of continuous watch camps, festivals, workshops, and open-air discussions contributed to the preservation of the area, while concurrently facilitating its reconstruction as a collective living space. Legal victories in 2019 led to the project’s complete cessation. The Kazdağları case demonstrates that scaling is not confined to upward scaling; it also occurs horizontally and diagonally. It underscores the importance of local knowledge in commoning and demonstrates a multi-scalar defense of the commons supported by international interaction.

4.7. Social Movements Against the Çeşme Tourism Project – İzmir

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has proposed the “Çeşme Tourism Project,” which encompasses approximately 16,000 hectares. This project encompasses natural protected zones, agricultural and pasture lands, and olive groves (TMMOB İzmir, 2020).. This case exemplifies a downward neoliberal scaling process. Local people, professional chambers, national and local NGOs, environmental groups, bar associations, and various experts opposed the project, arguing that it would harm nature, cultural heritage, and the public interest. Concurrent with the ongoing legal and social resistance, archaeological discoveries were made in the area, and a portion of the region was designated as an archaeological site. The area’s reclassification as a “cultural and ecological commons” can be attributed to heightened public awareness and collective mobilization. The Çeşme case demonstrates the significance of upward, multi-scalar actor networks in resisting neoliberal downward scaling of state processes and exemplifies their capacity to redefine space.

5. Conclusion

In the social movements examined in this study, it is predominantly local-scale actors who initiate mobilization, while the support of national-scale actors proves crucial throughout the process. At the local level, residents, local NGOs, and local governments (municipalities and neighborhood heads) are typically seen as initiators of social struggles. At the national level, professional chambers and national NGOs play a prominent supportive role. In cases where support from local governments is strong—such as in Gerze and Alpu—success was achieved more quickly. These spaces of success demonstrate an upward rescaling process, while the presence of global actors during and after the process also signals a multi-level rescaling dynamic that includes both upward and downward interactions. The connections established with global actors provide valuable insights into the expanded scope of governance scales and the cross-scalar nature of interactions.

The struggles in rural areas and the involvement of urban actors further validate cross-scalar interactions, revealing that these actors’ expectations for urban life align with the principles of sustainable nature and participatory governance. When considering the views of actors in the spaces where success was achieved, it becomes clear that cross-scalar interaction has significantly increased, necessitating multilayered and multilevel forms of governance. The success of these movements is contingent upon their ability to establish networks and reconfigure spaces through the implementation of multi-scalar governance strategies.

Our findings from the field reveal that space is not merely perceived as something to be preserved, but rather as a commons practice that is collectively re-produced and within which social relations are restructured. An alternative mode of organization has emerged, characterized by commoning practices. This framework is characterized by collective organization of decision-making processes, the production and sharing of knowledge, and the subjectification of space as a commons. The scaling processes observed in the cases examined

demonstrate not only upward scaling but also the development of alternative multi-level governance practices, indicating the expansive influence of scale (Young, 2002).

The limitation of local policies by national ones provides a clear indication that cross-scalar dynamics are being disregarded. The lack of attention to place-based (local) knowledge at the national and international levels remains a significant issue (Brenner, 2019). The primary motivation for diverse levels of organizational support for these movements lies in the ability to communicate local knowledge through scientific means to national and international media.

In terms of the legal framework in Türkiye, although there are certain protection mechanisms in place, it is evident that legal authority has been undermined in many areas. The main reasons for this include arbitrariness in the application of law, the politicization of judicial processes, inadequate institutional capacity, and the prevalence of decision-making mechanisms that facilitate market operations at the expense of participatory principles (Bakker, 2007). In contrast, the scale interactions and scalar fluidity created by these social struggles are supported by legal capacity aligned with local actors, expert knowledge and professions that scientifically demonstrate the interconnection between nature and public health, media visibility, international solidarity networks, and the persistent engagement of the public in organized resistance.

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