

Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey

By Salih Can Açıksöz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 272 pp. 19 illus. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-5203-0530-4.

An engaging, sophisticated contribution to the literature on conflict studies, political violence, medical anthropology, gender studies, and disability studies, *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* is likely to put Turkey on the map of world anthropology as never before. The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Salih Can Açıksöz in Istanbul between 2005 and 2008 with working-class, disabled veterans of the Kurdish conflict. The preface powerfully expresses the quandaries of a Turkish citizen studying the most taboo subjects in Turkey: the military, the Kurdish conflict, and heteronormative masculinity.

In the introduction, Açıksöz explains why disabled veterans of the Kurdish war make such compelling subjects for the study of conflict and political violence. These conscripted soldiers inhabit a gray zone as both perpetrators and victims, being associated with society's center and its margins, what it holds sacred and what it views as abject. Through his detailed analysis of how disabled veterans become drawn into ultranationalist politics as their phantom limbs are made sacred objects like the bodies of martyrs, Açıksöz contributes to ongoing theoretical debates on sovereignty, necropolitics, hauntology, biopolitics,

and nationalism. In particular, he argues that theories on sovereignty can benefit from the literature on sacrifice, and his analysis draws productively on the seminal works of Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, René Girard, Henry Hubert, and Marcel Mauss.

In chapter 1, "Being-on-the-Mountain," Açıksöz narrates the stories of young men whose experience of military conscription, a masculine rite of passage, is radically transformed with the emergence of a Kurdish guerilla movement. These soldiers develop a new, intimate relationship with Turkey's unnamed Kurdish region as part of the counter-insurgency campaign of the 1990s. Açıksöz describes the disturbing and surreal world of the soldier on the move who "takes carcasses" of guerillas imagined as demasculinized heathen Others or masculinized females. A lengthy anecdote about smoking in the mountains conveys brilliantly soldiers' affective states, both during the conflict and afterward.

In chapter 2, "The Two Sovereignties: Masculinity and the State," Açıksöz analyzes the production of a gendered regime of citizenship in Turkey. He suggests a pact was created between the modern state and male citizens, who were privileged with masculine sovereignty in return for military service. Açıksöz goes on to argue that disability created a double crisis of masculinity and political legitimacy. He shows that the state responded by making disabled veterans gazi, a status historically associated with the wounded in religious wars. This allowed disabled veterans access to prostheses, jobs, housing credit, and



assisted conception. Açiksöz depicts the production of this new governmental regime in the orthopedic clinics of military hospitals. Moving on from the affordances of being wounded in war, chapter 3, “Of Gazis and Beggars,” analyzes disabled veterans’ complex positionality as both abject and sacralized—for just as stigmatized beggars depend on alms, stigmatized disabled veterans depend on state welfare.

In chapter 4, “Communities of Loss,” Açiksöz describes the urban spaces of the organizations that bring disabled veterans together, creating an activist movement. His ethnographic anecdotes bring to life the everyday camaraderie and humor characteristic of groups of disabled veterans. While the title of *gazi* gives them a standing akin to martyrs, Açiksöz suggests that the everyday experience of living with disabled and stigmatized bodies makes veterans feel that their gift to the state can never be repaid. This crisis of legitimacy, he argues, is resolved through the interpellation of disabled soldiers into an ultranationalist political movement. In this process, disabled veterans become aware of the value of their bodies—and absent limbs—as a political commodity. They use their victimhood to remake themselves as sacrificial heroes. He demonstrates the role that mafia TV series play in constituting these new subjectivities. Açiksöz points tellingly at the notorious figure of Polat Alemdar in *Valley of the Wolves*, who, refusing to submit even to the state, claims that he himself is the state.

Chapter 5, “Prosthetic Revenge,” focuses on the spectacular political performances associated with ultranationalist politics. Açiksöz describes the emergence in the media of the disturbing figure of the disabled veteran using his prosthetic limb to make political claims. He argues that when the government abolished the death penalty under pressure from the EU, and rescinded PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s execution, the ultranational movement needed a scapegoat. He suggests the murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and the persecution of intellectuals and aca-

demics can be read as a search for surrogate sacrificial victims. More recently, of course, the changing policies of the Erdoğan regime and its need for the support of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) have reduced the distance between the government and ultranationalist political movements.

In chapter 6, “Prosthetic Debts,” Açiksöz shows that with the emergence of a privatized health and welfare regime, disabled veterans became heavily indebted through the financial system. This was grist to the mill for the nationalist media, which created sensational stories about prosthesis repossession. In the epilogue, Açiksöz narrates the dizzying events that have transformed Turkey since the end of his fieldwork in 2008. Reiterating a common feeling among anthropologists working on Turkey, he suggests that what begins as ethnography soon becomes history. As much has changed in Turkey since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power, and particularly since the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, the story ethnographers tell feels out of sync with the present. This raises questions about the convention of writing in the ethnographic present and bringing the story up to date in the conclusion or epilogue. Given the fact that contemporary anthropologists are more able to maintain their relationship to the field than in the past, multiple temporalities and changes in interpretation can more readily be incorporated into the narrative itself. This necessitates experimenting with and rethinking the conventions of writing ethnography.

Unlike many academic tomes, this book is a compelling read, as the author makes his own voice, presence, and experience felt in a palpable, visceral, and moving way. *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* is particularly suited for teaching theory in anthropology, as, unlike many ethnographies, it succeeds in managing the difficult balance between ethnography and theory. Rather than feeling extrinsic to the local story, the theories of Mbembe, Agamben, Girard, Hubert, and Mauss are

used to illuminate the case study, while the case study contributes to theory at the same time, suggesting that sacrifice is central to sovereignty and that the homo sacerization of some is paralleled by the sacralization of others. Furthermore, as the author shows, the process of sacralization is itself ambiguous, with sacrificial victims being divided within between sovereignty and abjectness.

Salih Can Açıksöz's research raises important ethical, moral, and theoretical questions about the limits of fieldwork, particularly for anthropologists coming from the societies they work in. Açıksöz and his informants come from different class and cultural backgrounds, and they inhabit radically different political universes. It would have been good to know more about how Açıksöz dealt with this in building his relationship to his informants. He does admit that he was unable to bring himself to participate in ultranationalist political protests along with the veterans. Furthermore, when Açıksöz became a signatory of the Academics for Peace petition, which critiqued the state's Kurdish war in January 2016, he realized that as someone now accused of being a "terrorist," he would have difficulty maintaining the relationships he had worked so hard to cultivate. This raises the issue of the limits of fieldwork, which includes dealing with the consequences of publishing one's work. Some readers may raise questions about Açıksöz's empathy for disabled veterans, given that they are affiliated with ultranationalist movements that condone the killing of their enemies. Yet Açıksöz has taken up a particular challenge, given that anthropologists prefer to work with the powerless with whom they often identify politically. What makes the disabled veterans fascinating, both ethnographically and theoretically, after all, is their ambiguous status as victims who long for sovereignty. Açıksöz reminds us of the importance of conducting fieldwork on the majority in Turkey: Turkish speakers of Sunni Muslim origin who identify as Turks.

Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey depicts Tur-

key's Kurdish war from the perspective of Turkish conscripts. Given the fact that Kurds who are Turkish citizens are also conscripted, it would have been useful for Açıksöz to refer to this. There is also little analysis in the book of the racialization of the Kurdish conflict, even though Açıksöz does provide ethnographic anecdotes such as disabled veterans labeling strangers as Kurds based on their appearance. Despite his invaluable contribution to gender studies, Açıksöz underplays the discussion of sexuality, a subject that requires more ethnographic research in Turkey, particularly vis-à-vis violence. While Açıksöz does make some reference to the other side of the looking glass, more discussion of the complex relationship between the world of the conscripts and that of the guerillas would have been of interest. An ethnography of the Kurdish war from the perspective of the Kurds is a much-needed complement to this important book, and I hope publications by other members of this new generation of anthropologists will provide us with this vantage point.

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For the Love of Humanity: The World Tribunal on Iraq

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq prompted worldwide popular opposition that was most visible in the images of millions of protestors who took to the streets. Those protestors were united in their opposition to the war but are in fact diverse in the nature of their political commitments. Among them was a group who wanted to bring justice where the "official institutions of international law failed to act" and to be the actor that will "chronicle the untold death and destruction that the war would bring . . . [and] to record the great