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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## Gender, Disability, and Abandonment in the Aftermath of War

Review by Seda Saluk

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

by Salih Can Açıksöz. 2020, Berkeley: University of California Press.

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*Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* is a beautifully written ethnography of the everyday lives and political activism of disabled veterans of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish guerillas. The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Salih Can Açıksöz in Istanbul between 2005 and 2008 with disabled veterans as they navigate memories of counter-guerilla warfare; friend, family, and advocacy networks; and debilitating healthcare and welfare regimes. Through poignant ethnographic vignettes, Açıksöz examines how a deeply militarized nation-state conscripts lower- and working-class subjects into its army. The state later sends them to intense war contexts utilizing gendered economies of (national) sacrifice, only to leave them abandoned in the aftermath of war. Generated by medical and financial disenfranchisement, disabled veterans' political resentment deepens as they try to make sense of their abandonment. This resentment ultimately becomes the driving force of their mobilization in ultranationalist right-wing politics that create the conditions that harm them in the first place.

Chapter 1, "Being-on-the-Mountains," probes how Turkey's militarized landscape acts as a liminal geography in the context of the decades-long Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Mountains inhabit a special place in this landscape both for Turkish nationalism and the Kurdish movement.

While mountains are zones of refuge and resistance for Kurdish guerillas, they are spaces for the conquest of minds and bodies for the Turkish counterinsurgency through (re)naming, bombing, and maiming. Through a nuanced engagement with the disabled veterans' affective memories of being-on-the mountains, Açıksöz discusses how the mountains inhabit a gray zone for the conscripts, where they become both perpetrators and victims of state violence. The chapter also powerfully shows that the Turkish soldier-subject on-the-mountains is constructed in relation to the Kurdish guerilla and how this construction is always gendered, sexualized, and ethno-racialized in specific ways. The masculine pride of being-on-the mountains for Turkish soldiers becomes possible only through the discursive demasculinization of Kurdish guerillas.

Chapter 2, "The Two Sovereignties: Masculinity and the State," details how Turkey's compulsory military service operates as a hetero-patriarchal social contract between the modern state and the male citizenry. The latter is promised to become "full-fledged masculine citizens/workers/consumers" (p. 47) after paying their debt to the homeland through participating in the military. Like many other social contracts, only a select group of people -heterosexual, non-disabled bodies- are included in this contract, while others -queer and disabled bodies- are systematically excluded. This conditional inclusion eventually turns heterosexual, non-disabled male subjects into non-normative bodies through the violence of the armed conflict. In the end, the state -and its military-industrial complex- does not hold its end of the bargain and abandon disabled veterans, who ultimately find themselves excluded from public citizenship as they cannot find jobs or get married in an immensely ableist society. While disabled veterans grapple with gendered anxieties as they depend on their families for material support and daily care, the state finds the solution to restore their injured masculinity through granting them a unique political status, "ghazi." This newly granted status incorporates veterans into the nationalist discourse as "honorable war heroes" while at the same time turning them into particular governmental subjects through state-regulated services such as job placement, housing credit, and assisted reproduction.

Chapter 3, "Of Gazis and Beggars," explores the cultural/historical grammar and everyday implications of the ghazi status. Disabled veterans find themselves in the middle of two conflicting subject positions and accompanying regimes of value, as veteran soldiers and

disabled citizens. On the one hand, they become part of a long lineage of hyper-masculinized religio-national heroes in the public discourse, embodied in the historical figure of ghazi who sacrifices himself for the greater good of the religious and national community. On the other, they struggle with profoundly gendered cultural stigmas around disability in their everyday lives, epitomized by yet another historical figure, the street beggar. To make sense of and navigate this dual situation, what Açıksöz calls a *sacrificial crisis*, disabled veterans develop new communities and political subjectivities, which Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 delve into.

In Chapter 4, “Communities of Loss,” Açıksöz narrates how disabled veterans build communities from affective attachments and common loss, in the form of formal and informal associations. These non-governmental associations provide legal advice and therapeutic healing and mediate disabled veterans’ relationship with state institutions. They also function as extra-governmental actors that regulate veterans’ involvement in politics to make sure that they do not drift apart from nationalist agendas. Chapter 5, “Prosthetic Revenge,” describes how the state institutions, advocacy associations, and veterans themselves utilize their sacrificial limbs as political commodities to make specific claims. Through performative acts such as removing and displaying prosthetic limbs during political demonstrations, disabled veterans become essential figures in the state’s psychological warfare. These performances set the affective tone during the mediatized trials of the dissident political figures such as the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and the later-assassinated Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. Disabled veterans retake the stage with similar protest strategies when they feel betrayed by the state after the EU-supported abolishment of the death penalty and the change in Article 301 of the penal code that criminalizes “insulting Turkishness.”

In the sixth and last chapter, “Prosthetic Debts,” Açıksöz analyzes the political economy of war disability in Turkey. The chapter examines how the proliferation of IMF-backed consumer credit mechanisms creates the conditions for veterans’ further disenfranchisement by burying them into financial debt in a neoliberalized healthcare and welfare system. As disabled veterans increasingly rely on bank loans to purchase technologically advanced prostheses from private companies, the removal and display of their prosthetic limbs once again turn into mediatized spectacles, this time in the form of “prosthesis repossession” by manufacturers, banks, and

insurance systems. The chapter compellingly shows how disabled veterans, once celebrated as honorable heroes who paid their national debts through sacrificing themselves for the homeland, can quickly become disposable subjects when they fail to pay back their financial debts in a neoliberal consumer economy.

This award-winning ethnography provides a much-needed analytical lens to understand how gender, class, and disability regimes are intimately co-constituted. By putting gender and class in close dialogue with discussions around (war) disability, the book sheds light on the ways in which lower- and working-class, disabled masculinities are (re)imagined and enacted in the aftermath of militarized violence. As such, Açiksöz effectively reminds us of how otherwise unmarked bodies in theories of sovereignty and biopolitics (and necropolitics) are already always gendered, classed, and ethno-racialized in specific ways. The book also makes an important contribution to making sense of the global success of right-wing nationalist political movements in the mobilization of masses, when members of those masses are the ones who are affected most by these movements' disenfranchising politics. *Sacrificial Limbs* is a timely addition to political and medical anthropology, as well as gender studies, disability studies, and the Middle East studies.

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