

Book Review

Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics Under Neoliberal Islam

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The Gezi Protests of 2013 are one of the most important turning points in Turkey's recent history. When Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ordered that Gezi Park be demolished in order to rebuild an Ottoman military barrack in the form of a shopping mall, a handful of protesters gathered in the small Istanbul park. Though they did surprisingly manage to stop the Istanbul municipality's bulldozers from removing the trees, they also witnessed the anticipated police violence that followed, in response to their action. Police attacked people with water cannons and tear gas, and burned the tents of demonstrators camping in the park. This group was soon joined by more protestors, and the demonstrations became no longer just about the park, but also about Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian style, which had a massive impact on the everyday lives of Turkish citizens. Protests spread all over the country, turning into the biggest civil uprising against a government in Turkey's history.

The story of the Gezi Protests as summarised above is well known. Many scholars, journalists or politicians interpret the Gezi Protests as a critical moment that led to an intensification of the repression of human rights and increased authoritarianism in Turkey. Yet what is often missed in this well-known analysis of the Gezi Protests is its queer potential, which provides a completely new perspective—not only for queer struggles in Turkey, but also for queer theory in general—through the novel ways in which the protests undermined categories of identity, ideology, and politics. Evren Savcı's remarkable book revisits the Gezi Protests, among other sites, stories and biographies in Turkey, to illustrate a new way out for a queer theory that has been stuck in binaries, such as colonial/authentic, structure/agency, neoliberalism/empowerment, and negativity/world-making, over the last two decades, creating a worrisome either/or analytical framework. For me, this timely book offers a much-needed shift away from a US-centric critical framework, to encompass the complexities of Turkey, which destabilise simplistic theorisations of the impacts of neoliberalism, westernisation, hegemonic regimes of gender and sexuality, and religion upon non-normative gender identities, sexualities and expressions.

Queer scholarship that addresses Turkey, the Middle East, or any region that falls outside of the Global North, can fall into the trap of culturalising these regions. Such scholarship marks these regions with difference, and discusses their particularities as contaminated with colonialism and/or westernisation. This often comes with a certain nostalgia for a lost culture that existed before the disruptive, violent impacts of colonialism. Savcı goes beyond this persistent narrative, and manages to step out of the scholarship that addresses Muslim cultures as mere victims of colonial modernity, and Islam as a homogenous and radical alterity of the west. By shifting her analytical standpoint from a western to a Turkish one, from which Islam does not function as the cultural other but as part of the population's lived political experience, the author manages to grasp the unfolding of contradicting events,

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such as the rise of LGBTIQ+ movements as well as the political homophobia and transphobia within societies, in which Islam and neoliberalism have many faces.

What distinguishes Savcı's analytical framework from most queer scholarship is her approach to *translation* as a tool to trace the movement and transformation of certain concepts and vocabulary of sexual and gender discourse in Turkey. Drawing on ethnographic observations in Istanbul and Ankara, the author analyses how concepts such as 'gender identity,' 'hate crimes,' 'coming out,' and 'LGBT rights' enter the realm of public political discussions, and how they create contradictions and unexpected outcomes that make new activist strategies and individual resistances possible.

While most of the terms that Savcı observes travel from the west to Turkey, there are also words rooted in Turkey's queer struggle that are often impossible to translate into English—such as 'ayol.' 'Ayol,'—a popular idiom among Turkey's queer subculture that reflects effeminacy and 'limp-wristedness'—was translated into a slogan and hashtag (*#direnayol*, *#resistayol*) during the Gezi Protests. This queer subcultural idiom 'queered the hyper-masculinised, tear-gas wielding, barricade-building bodies, redefining the subject of revolution,' to use the author's own words (p. 137). Put differently, *translation*, as Savcı observes in her book, does not always function as a one-way street from the west to the East, but also takes place between and within different political struggles in Turkey and helps to queer public space.

Throughout the book, Savcı underlines the difference between *translation* and *discourse*. The author suggests using translation studies as an analytical framework, as it allows more nuanced analysis (than discourse- or text-based approaches to language) in capturing the ever-changing meanings and functions of certain concepts, words and vocabularies related to sexuality (and gender) in the messiness of social life and during their migration between languages.

Within this framework, the book provides rich ethnographic material that includes the complexities of social life in its analysis of language. And yet, the book's argumentation about the need for distancing from purely textual discourse would have benefited from further discussions, as works that are based on textual analysis do not necessarily opt out of the social or historical contextualisation of language. Indeed, for me, Savcı explores certain epistemic transformations, such as the debates between headscarf activists and LGBTIQ+ rights within the same framework of human rights discourse (in chapter one) by using texts as her main sources of analysis. Within this framework, the author reflects the ambivalences and complexities of juxtaposing discourses on headscarf activism and LGBTIQ+ rights. While LGBTIQ+ rights, as the author observes, were often instrumentalised by Turkey's secularists to contest the commitment of headscarf activists to justice for all, the government interpreted headscarf activism as the 'good human rights discourse,' (as opposed to LGBTIQ+ rights, which it saw as making extremist demands). Within this framework, the author discusses a dialogue that took place in 2008 between Muslim writers and LGBTIQ+ activists. This dialogue had the potential to create a new kind of politics against cruelty, which opposes any form of cruelty, toward any person, regardless of identity. Opposing cruelty beyond identity politics might offer a common ground for productive engagement between religious Muslims and LGBTIQ+ activists.

Savcı's ethnographic observations relating to some of the central concepts within LGBTIQ+ rights demonstrate how their meanings and functions shift and take on new forms once they arrive in Turkey. Take, for instance, the discussion on 'coming out' in chapter two. This process is still considered essential to 'healthy' LGBTIQ+ identity development within western and *white* LGBTIQ+ discourse. When Ahmet Yıldız¹ was murdered after his coming-out, it attracted international media attention, as it was seen as the first known 'honour killing' of a gay man in Turkey. The author shifts her attention to Yıldız's friends, who complicated the out/closeted binary by positioning themselves as gay men/bears who do not believe in coming out to family members.

Subsequently, there has been great media, activist and scholarly interest in Ahmet Yıldız's death. Savcı weaves this story with another that received almost no media or activist attention: the struggle of Ummuhan Darama. Ahmet Yıldız was killed in the front of Darama's café and Darama herself was injured in the shooting, with a bullet hitting her heel. Darama's ex-husband's family was threatening her before Yıldız's death and, in fact, her café was shot a number of times a couple of weeks after Yıldız's death as well. So the author rightfully points to the possibility that Ahmet Yıldız was killed by mistake, the actual target having been Darama. Darama's story disrupts the coherent narrative of 'gay honour killing,' and demands new visions of justice for people who experience violence due to their intimacies, sexualities and kinship formations, no matter how they position themselves in the matrix of identities.

Evren Savcı's book simultaneously offers an historical analysis of Turkey's recent queer struggle. In chapter three, for instance, she turns to the history of state violence against trans women in Turkey and observes how this violence has changed practice in the course of time since the 1980s. In earlier years, state violence against trans women was carried out in the form of deportations, the illegalisation of performances by trans artists, torture in jails and public shaming such as in the shaving of the heads of trans women. In later years, arguably it turned into

¹ Ahmet Yıldız was shot dead on 15 July 2008 in Uskudar (a district of Istanbul) after his coming out.

a *deeper* violence, a term that Savcı coins to address the state's indirect role in supporting its citizens' attacks on trans women. As *deep citizens* with conservative, religious, and nationalist values went on to attack minorities including trans women, police violence is now increasingly used to control and regulate the larger national body. By shifting her attention to the hopelessness of trans activists in such a violent civil atmosphere, the author shows the potentials of queer negativity in doing politics and navigating an increasingly authoritarian society.

Throughout the book, Savcı takes the reader along an intellectual journey that explores how concepts that are rarely placed alongside one another can come together to create new perspectives on the operationalisation of the regimes of gender and sexuality.

Perhaps the most important juxtaposition of terms that Savcı explores consists of 'neoliberalism' and 'Islam,' which builds a productive bedrock for the book's central arguments. In queer studies, these terms are rarely thought through together. Queer studies' critique of the processes that produce normalised subjects through the impacts of neoliberalism on sexual rights, such as the well-known critique against same-sex marriages, gays serving in the military, hate crime laws, gay ghettos gentrifying neighbourhoods, etc., have mostly focused on national contexts within the west. Islam, on the other hand, has rarely been thought as entangled with neoliberalism's impact on queer lifeworlds. When these terms are discussed together in queer literature, Islam is typically imagined, rather, as a minoritised position—the Muslim immigrant living in the west, or the colonised subject as the ultimate Other of the west.

By focusing on Turkey, Savcı's book blurs these divisions between neoliberalism and a cultural/religious Other. It shows how Islam and capitalism merge with one another and create new forms of violence but also open up new and unexpected ways of resistance and activism in Turkey. She disrupts the binary between 'the neoliberal West' and 'the Muslim East' by exploring the movement of concepts and vocabulary within sexual rights discourse. What could provide more nuanced context to Savcı's theorisation, however, is the transnational, diasporic connection between Turkey and the neoliberal west. Not only do concepts and discourses travel across borders; so, too, do subjects move between nation states, bringing new perspectives that shift epistemologies within national contexts. The international media attention on Ahmet Yıldız's case, for instance, cannot be fully grasped without considering the role of Turkey's queer diaspora in Germany.

Still, Savcı's focus on the role of language in changing the epistemological landscapes of sexuality and gender, interlinking categories that were formerly thought as separate, and demonstrating the complex impacts of neoliberalism and capitalism in a world that is shaped by diverse forms of epistemic violence and historical erasure is a much needed and timely intervention into queer studies. Savcı argues that not every violent repression and erasure of queer lives can be explained by colonialism. And yet, for me, one might ask at this point, whether we can perceive any form of contemporary epistemic violence and historic erasure as completely unrelated to direct or *indirect* impacts of colonialism. Is there any region, form of political violence or knowledge that is not contaminated by colonialism? This is a question that emerges after reading Savcı's impressive book.

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